Fruitlessness in Our Assemblies

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Plain Words for Plain Christians

> *Thus saith the Lord of hosts; Consider your ways. (Haggai 1:7)*
> *If ye know these things, happy are ye if ye do them. (John 13:17)*

Or, Where Did the Joy and the Power Go?

We in the Assemblies say we follow the pattern laid down in the New Testament. To some extent we do. However, [A passage here could not be read in the scan.] as a group we are weak, and in our own neighborhoods fruitless—far from "turning the world upside-down" as was said of the New Testament church.

Where there is weakness there must be a cause. During several months of Bible reading in company with other brethren the writer was pointed to some causes while studying in the first five chapters of Acts. Later, what first seemed to be a number of separate causes were seen to be manifestations of a greater and deeper fault which has the majority of our people firmly in its grip.

If the reader is seriously interested, some quiet study in Acts 1 to 5, comparing what was done then with what we do now, will show the basis for the following observations (and indeed show many other things that will instruct and edify).*

* It is sadly typical of our times that not many who read this are likely to actually open the Book and make the comparison for themselves. Serious Bible Study seems to be out of style these days.

Cause #1: Rejection of the Authority of the Lord Jesus Christ

In Acts 1 the church had its foundation in what Jesus began to do and to teach (Acts 1:1). There is no other [A passage here could not be read in the scan.] be considered minor detail. For instance, He commanded that they should not depart from Jerusalem (Acts 1:4) so they returned to Jerusalem (Acts 1:12). Here appears the first cause of our present Assembly fruitlessness (see John 15:4): THE ABSOLUTE AUTHORITY OF THE LORD JESUS CHRIST AND OF THE SCRIPTURES IS NOT ACCEPTED, even by our assembly Christians who proclaim adherence to the New Testament pattern. If anyone doubts this, let him compare his own life with Matthew chapters 5, 6, and 7; and the proceedings in his assembly with I Corinthians chapters 12 and 14.

Cause #2: Ignoring the Holy Spirit

Jesus said (Acts 1:8), "Ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you", whereupon the disciples waited, continuing in prayer and supplication until they were indeed filled with the Holy Ghost and did receive power. In contrast THERE IS TODAY LESS AND LESS WAITING ON THE HOLY SPIRIT. There are indeed many assemblies where there is not a single meeting that is completely Spirit-led. Even the morning meeting is neatly bundled up at the end with "a word of prayer by the elder in charge for this month", rather than waiting on the Spirit for every detail down to the closing hymn, prayer, or a word of scripture. The writer, having had experience in meetings that were fully Spirit-led, believes that much blessing is thus lost.

In our prayer meetings and other assembly functions the Holy Spirit has little if anything to do with the proceedings. The "elder whose month it is" determines the order of events, the songs to be sung, finds a speaker, etc. The [A passage here could not be read in the scan.] or a word of exhortation or testimony as the Spirit leads. We have gone better than half way to the formalized and spiritless meetings of the denominational churches from which we profess to differ. Our increasing lethargy testifies thereto. In some places we are introducing entertainment features, ostensibly to attract outsiders, but really because our tastes are no longer satisfied by the simple things of the Lord.

Cause #3: Defective "Bringing Up" of Younger Christians

[A passage here could not be read in the scan.] ERS SHOULD EXAMINE THEMSELVES AS TO HOW THEIR "BRINGING UP" OF THE YOUNGER ONES COMPARES WITH THAT WHICH THE LORD GAVE HIS DISCIPLES. For the Lord had given these men an exceedingly thorough bringing up. He chose them, took them with Him, taught them, corrected them, sent them out, encouraged them, took them into His confidence, loved them, and prayed for them.

When the Lord returned to heaven (Acts 1:9 & 10) the disciples, after a reminder from "the two men in white apparel", were well prepared as to what to do next. This would be a fruitful subject of study in any assembly. Proper "bringing up" might lessen the departure toward worldliness that seems to increase with each generation, until it again becomes necessary for scripturally minded Christians to "come out from among them."

Cause #4: Leaving Too Much To Our "Leaders"

When the Lord Jesus went back to heaven He left the disciples, as it were, without an earthly leader. This was undoubtedly necessary for them to develop their own gifts with the help of the Holy Spirit. As long as the Lord Jesus was here in the flesh they were dependent on Him, but when He left them, after their "bringing up" had been accomplished, they went on from strength to strength. In like manner, OUR OWN ELDERS WHO HAVE LONG LED AND GOVERNED SHOULD NOT CONTINUE TO DO EVERYTHING THEMSELVES. If they do, it brings lethargy and lack of development among younger men who must be the elders of the future.

Cause #5: Lack of Effectual Fervent Prayer

Collective prayer by the early Christians was much resorted to (Acts 1:14, 4:24, 12:12, etc.) and under the circumstances was undoubtedly fervent and purposeful. This contrasts with the schoolroom recitation-like quality of much of our public praying. This and the weakness of our own individual prayer life probably rests on our individual lethargy to service to God. Any Christian who earnestly sets out to obey the Lord's commands soon finds need for frequent and fervent prayer. However, to the Christian who pursues the rewards of the world, obeying the Lord only when convenient, prayer tends to be one of those things we ought to do, but don't.

Cause #6: Lack of Study

There is evidence (Acts 1:16, 2:16, 3:18, 21, 24, 4:11, 25 & 28, etc.) that the disciples had studied the scriptures and were able to recognize fulfillment of a prophecy

when they saw it. In contrast, we as a group know little of such things. We are spoon-fed with a few fundamentals over and over to the point of mental fatigue. In our meetings we listen to a form of one man ministry, with a single speaker selected by man giving a monologue, while the audience sits well intentioned but semi-comatose, and quickly forgets "the message".

Today IT IS PRACTICALLY IMPOSSIBLE TO GATHER A CONTINUING GROUP FOR A REAL CONVERSATIONAL-TYPE BIBLE READING, completely Spirit-led, with each one studying before-hand and bringing out the profound things of God's Word which are hidden from the casual reader.

Cause #7: Lack of Fellowship

In Acts 2:42 they "continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers"; and there is evidence that they knew and shared each others experience and welfare much more than we do now.

Today, especially in city assemblies, the individual Christian walks a lonely way. There is little mutual helpfulness—less than in many worldly groups. There is no sharing of everyday Christian experience, the ups and downs that could be so helpful to others in showing how the Lord deals with us daily. We gather in cliques, chat with our cronies, and go our ways for the week.

There is need for an occasional Spirit-led gathering of the saints for fellowship, where anyone could offer a bit of testimony from the Lord's recent dealings with him, a bit of scripture that has been precious, give out a hymn he longs to sing, or a word of exhortation or praise

"speaking the wonderful works of God", or just stand up and tell something that needs to be done as Peter did in Acts 1:15. Such a weekly or monthly meeting, perhaps including a meal together, "eating their meat with gladness and singleness of heart" would certainly build up and encourage the brethren, young and old.

Cause #8: Lack of Witness

The disciples "spake the word of God with boldness," "and with great power gave the apostles witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus; and great grace was upon them all", (Acts 4:31 & 33). Anyone who has moved among our assemblies knows our lack of witness in our own communities. We gather and talk "Christian talk" to each other in our meetings and hope someone will come in to listen, but we feel our powerlessness. Outsiders who come "to see how real Christians do" go away unimpressed and unconvinced.

While we comfort ourselves in that we do better than [A passage here could not be read in the scan.] ily in its own juice. There is no goal and few seem to care. There is even a lack of will to keep the meeting house premises presentable. The paint peels, the windows lose their putty, and the weeds grow. There is however often a potential that requires only a spark to set it off. When we start something we "come alive" as it were. If we carry it far enough and get deeply involved, we realize how much we need God's help and we begin to pray—which is where real growth starts.

Cause #9: Lack of Singleness of Heart (Double Mindedness)

In Acts 5, Ananias and Sapphira wanted to be counted among the disciples while still making provision for the world. Whether from lack of trust or covetousness, they tried to appear wholly committed, while still reserving some part for "a rainy day" or perhaps for their own current purposes.

Perhaps they intended at first to give the entire price of the land as others had done, but were afflicted by doubt from Satan. At any rate, the result was an attempt to appear what they were not—a fault which, sad to say, exists among us today—leading to hypocrisy and lying. "Ye can not serve God and mammon" (Matthew 6:24).

Cause #10: Entanglement in the Affairs of the World

This is perhaps the greatest cause of our powerlessness. There are really few Christians who act as though they believe the Lord's Command, "Seek ye first the kingdom of God" (Matthew 6:33, Luke 12:31) or the promise "all these things shall be added unto you", neither the warning, "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also". This underlies all nine causes listed above. Thus:

1. We do not fully accept the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ because we do not believe we can do so and get along in today's world. We can't bring ourselves to believe that He really meant what He said.

2. We are afraid to wait on the leading of the Holy Spirit because of our "do-it-yourself" worldly training. We feel

we have to take things in our own hands and get them done by the methods used in the organizations of men.

3. Instead of the Lord's methods in "bringing up" His chosen ones we adopt the world's "bulk education" methods because we "just don't have time".

4. Our elders and overseers sometimes continue when the oversight should be passed along to others, a common condition in worldly organizations. We should be willing to act in full trust that the Lord will provide the necessary gifts and oversight in the assembly, and that these gifts are in need of development and exercise. There is need for confidence in God.

5. We don't pray fervently and effectually because we really don't feel that the matter is urgent. By our own efforts we get along our well-upholstered way, using the methods of the world, with the result there is little we are really driven to pray about. Quite often words uttered in our prayer meetings are said for the ears of man rather than in urgent cry to the Lord of glory.

6. We don't undertake really deep study of God's Word because, when we try it, we find that it rebukes our worldly ways, so the Bible reading dwindles away as we allege "too many meetings" or other excuses.

7. We have more fellowship with our worldly friends than with those in the Assembly, because the things we have in common with them are more important to us. We trust them more, associate with them more, and put more effort into our worldly affairs.

8. Our witness is likewise ruined by our entanglement with the world. We scratch just as hard for position and wealth as any worldling. We really don't have much

concern for the salvation of those about us and our mouths are stopped by fear of what they may say or do.

9. We are double minded, trying unsuccessfully to serve both God and mammon just as did Ananias and Sapphira. We don't really trust, don't really believe that the Lord governs all things and will keep His promises, so we hold back our time, our money, and ourselves for worldly uses, while trying to persuade ourselves that what we do is all right.

To really seek first the kingdom of God is no easy and comfortable thing. It requires trust and obedience beyond [A passage here could not be read in the scan.] obedience there is no power.

> *Except the Lord build the house,*
> *they labor in vain that build it. (Psalm 127:1)*

To the Reader

Many will, perhaps, be offended by the title and contents of this little folder. The writer is certainly no Bible scholar and is one of the least of the brethren. Nevertheless the Holy Spirit has seemed to lead and provide from the beginning and ending of the Bible reading group, right along to the final writing hereof.

Therefore please look beyond these pages, which are the words of man, to those scriptures which show what the Lord Jesus commanded and what the order in a local church is really intended to be; and then consider how greatly our present practices differ therefrom. If this be done, this small tract can be forgotten.

The Author