The Lost Secret of the Early Church

W. J. Pethybridge

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We are given to understand that within about thirty years of the Crucifixion of Christ, the first Christians had spread the Gospel over the then-known world, and after two hundred years of the bitterest persecution in which emperor after emperor had attempted to blot out the name of Christ by destroying every believer, half the members of the Roman Empire had become secret Christians.

All of this was accomplished without the aid of any of the means we have today, even without printed Bibles. Yet today, in spite of the assistance of radio, television, recordings, printing, convenient travel, modern education, etc., we are failing even to keep pace with the growth of heathenism.

Had the early Church some secret which we have lost today? A close examination of the New Testament shows us that while they preached the same message, yet they used a different method, a method which at first sight seems far inferior to our own, but which on closer examination shows a capacity for far greater results.

Some will say "Revival is the answer," and we certainly need revival, but a study of revivals will show that though some have been as great as and possibly greater than Pentecost, we have always failed to conserve and spread the blessing in the way that the early Church accomplished it. Perhaps God is withholding revival till we learn and practice this secret.

Three things seem to stand out clearly: (1) The emphasis was on Holy Spirit ministry rather than on human

teaching. (2) The gatherings of the believers were in homes rather than in special church buildings. (3) Believers were taught to regard themselves as members of the body of Christ, rather than as mere individual believers. Let us examine these points in a little more detail.

The Holy Spirit's Ministry

(1) The chapters in John's Gospel, 13 to 17, need a very special study, for here we see the Lord Jesus telling His disciples that in spite of all the teaching He has given them, they still lack the vital knowledge which is to be brought to them by the new invisible Teacher who is to be sent in His place, the Holy Spirit. "When He is come, even the Spirit of Truth, He will guide you into all truth" (John 16). To show that this does not apply to the Apostles solely, but to all believers, we have only to turn to John's first epistle and read how he tells us in verses 20, 24, and 27 that believers have an "unction" or an "anointing" (the Holy Spirit), so that they can be taught apart from human aid.

This does not mean that divine teaching will not often reach us through human channels, but the emphasis is on the source rather than the channel, which, as we shall see presently, is very important. The fact is that as soon as a person is truly born of God, the divine Teacher Himself comes to dwell within him.

The Scriptural Place for Meeting

(2) A study of the Acts and Epistles reveals the fact that the only place where believers are said to have held their regular meetings was the home. It is true that they used the temple in Jerusalem for public testimony, but

they were "breaking bread from house to house" (Acts 2:46), and over twenty times we read of them carrying out their united worship in the home of a believer. Four times "the church in the house" is specifically mentioned (Romans 16:5; I Cor. 16:19; Colossians 4:15; Philemon 2).

At first sight it would seem that a church meeting in a home in this way is subject to many more limitations than our own modern method of holding services in special public buildings called "churches" or "chapels." But further thought will show several distinct advantages.

a) In a small group meeting in the friendly associations of a home, everybody can know each other and relationships are more real and less formal.

b) With the smaller number it is possible for everybody to take active part in the meeting, and so the whole Body of Christ present can function.

c) The big expenses involved in the building and upkeep of a large church building are saved, and can be used to help the Lord's poor, and missionary work.

d) When the group grows too large for the house, it can divide into two homes, and these two groups can divide again, so that the Church grows and expands rapidly over a much larger area.

e) Holding meetings informally in the home would avoid much of the unreality fostered by the usual putting on of special clothes to go to hear a special man in a special place.

f) Ministering to small groups in homes would overcome much of the temptation to self-importance which ruins

so much of God's work, where large buildings and a big congregation are involved.

g) Having a special building for meetings nearly always involves the idea of a special person as minister developing into "one man ministry" and preventing the full exercise of the priesthood of all believers.

h) If the "church in the home" falls through, there is left no dead organization to maintain as a spiritual, financial, and social liability on all connected with it.

We are given to understand that for the first 200 years after Christ, the Church never had special buildings of their own, and when at last they did, the art of exhortation degenerated into the issuing of commands.

Many groups which began in homes and have now become well-known organizations, have lost out in spiritual effectiveness since they moved into special buildings for their gatherings. This has not happened suddenly, for a special building is not a sin, but merely a sincere effort to glorify God which ultimately involves more drawbacks than advantages.

Members One of Another

(3) The early Church were taught to regard themselves not merely as a collection of saved individuals, but as active members of the Body of Christ. Not only did all believers form the one Body universal but each group functioned as the Body locally. In each of the three cases where these are mentioned (Romans 12; I Corinthians 12; and Ephesians 4), there is no suggestion of one man ministering to the whole group, but each is shown as having the privilege of possessing some spiritual gift, and the responsibility to minister this gift to the rest of

the local Church, so that every believer is looked on as a minister to the rest.

Modern research in education has shown that we learn little by merely listening, but when we try to impart what we know to others, we really begin to master our subject. This shows us the wisdom of God in planning the Church, not as a vast congregation of listeners, but as a small body sharing with each other what they learn from the Holy Spirit.

The picture we have of the early Church therefore is something very simple, but very vital. Whenever "two or three" would "gather together" in the name of the Lord, there they would expect to find their once crucified, now risen Lord present in the midst of them. They would also expect the Holy Spirit to work in each of them, and share with each other what was thus revealed. "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another" (Colossians 3). As the Holy Spirit worked in the midst, some or all the nine gifts of the Spirit mentioned in I Corinthians 12 would be manifested as He divided severally to every man as He chose. Each would himself be edified of his gift, and those who heard would likewise be blessed.

As each small group divided and so grew into a number of groups, these continued in fellowship with each other, and all the small gatherings in one city would together form "the Church of God in Ephesus," or wherever it might be. Yet each group would have no say in the way another was carried on; the Lord was the Head of each, and worked in each as He saw fit. But they would be free to exhort and admonish each other, though not to command.

We find that this true Church did not usually get on well with organized religion, but if there was a division it always came by the organized and religious group casting out the true believers. Until this happened, we find the position pictured in Acts 2:46, "continuing daily in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house." That is, they used the recognized place of divine worship, but also had their more intimate gatherings in their own homes.

It appears that in those days, some houses were built with a large upper room; possibly these belonged to the more wealthy members of the community, but the Lord saw to it that when such a place was needed, the owner of it would be saved and willing to have it used in this way. There is never any suggestion, however, of such a room being "dedicated" or specially set apart. In fact the whole emphasis of the New Testament is that God's temple is the individual believer and the local group and the whole Church, rather than any building made by man.

Practical Application Today

What practical suggestions can come out of this study? The answer is very simple, but we believe it would have profound and worldwide repercussions. Let believers keep up their present connections with organized Christianity as faithfully as possible, but let them also practice the simple procedure of the early Church. That is, whenever two meet, let them realize that the Lord is in the midst, and as they commune together about Him, let them expect a repetition of the walk to Emmaus, as told in Luke 24. Whenever two or three Christians find themselves together in the home of one of them, let

them remember the Lord is in the midst, have a time of simple worship and prayer, share the meditations they have received of Christ and His ways, turn to some passage of Scripture suggested by the Spirit, and trust Him to teach them from it.

Let the reader of this paper see if the Lord is guiding him or her to arrange for a few loving hearts to gather in the home regularly at such a time that it would not interfere with normal activities of their denomination, and trust the Lord to lead them out in prayer, worship, Bible study, waiting on God for His gifts, or the breaking of bread. Let Him choose how the time should be spent, by laying it on the hearts of one or two, and the rest feeling that it is the mind of the Spirit.

As time goes on the Lord could guide for the invitation of others, and personal or united witness to unbelievers would bring in more new members. The Lord would "add to the Church such as should be saved;" the group could divide and spread as further guidance would be given. The plan would be, not to seek larger buildings, but for more groups.

Dangers to Avoid

From the beginning there would be several dangers which would need prayerful watching to avoid.

a) Some find it too easy to talk, some find it difficult, so each would have to be very exercised in spirit that their words or silence were the leading of the Lord. It is also possible to begin in the Spirit, and go on in the flesh, so that those who are guided to speak must be ready for guidance to stop!

b) When differences of opinion arise, or differences of interpretation, both parties must exercise great love and forbearance. It greatly glorifies the grace of God when two with different opinions can maintain the unity of the Spirit. Often there is a measure of truth, and a measure of mistake, in both views, and much time must elapse and much light be given before either can come to the real truth involved in the two opinions. But there is a present supply of perfect love shed abroad in the heart by the Holy Ghost, which will enable two to remain one in heart and soul though differing in view.

c) To grow in grace and knowledge, we must grow away from ungraciousness and error, so we must each be willing to receive and give correction to others. Let us learn to speak lovingly and tactfully to each other about things which we see are hindering. Let us be so eager to be pleasing in the sight of God that we are glad when our errors are pointed out to us, even if it be by one who we think is less advanced than ourselves.

d) When guidance is being sought for the whole group, two opposite thoughts may appear, and we will be tempted to divide the group on the issue. If such a position arises, let us seek above all to maintain the unity of the Spirit, and a deep practical love and appreciation for those who differ from us.

e) As we meet in this simple Scriptural way, God may give us much light and blessing not possessed by those who cling in a conservative way to the usual form of Christian service. Let us seek deliverance from all pride or prejudice against such, and remember the debt we owe to those who have faithfully carried on the testimony of the Gospel through the ages. Let us seek as

much as possible to continue in full fellowship with all who love the Lord, and be faithful members of our denominational connection.

f) There are hundreds of false sects and cults, which might seek to inject their errors into such groups. They can usually be recognized by one or two characteristics. They nearly always claim to be the only people who are right, and their teachings come from some central headquarters demanding complete acceptance from followers. They tend to twist certain Scriptures and ignore others, or claim some extra revelation beyond the Bible.

g) Some ordained ministers may oppose these simple groups. Let us love them fervently. Others may heartily agree and desire to attend. This would be welcomed and their experience and knowledge of the Word would be a help as it was given in the guidance of the Spirit.

h) There would always be the danger of us preferring the ministry of the more gifted and more experienced members of the group. But let us bear in mind that the Lord is always seeking to impart ministry and gifts through the least esteemed members of the Body, so we should be specially alert to encourage every attempt of the weaker vessels to follow the leading of the Spirit. However this must be balanced by the concern of those whom the Lord has taught and gifted to see that the flock of God is properly fed; though they themselves must realize they have more to learn and that new knowledge may reach them through the most unexpected channels. In any case folk learn much more by expressing themselves than by merely listening.

i) In the world, success is achieved as a man makes himself indispensable, but in the Church of God true success is reached when a worker has brought others to take his place so that he can withdraw and continue to minister in a new needy field.

A Word to Ministers

The foregoing thoughts have already been discussed with quite a few ministers and full-time Christian workers of various denominations, and for the most part have been received with favor. We have heard of one minister with one of the largest evangelical churches in U. S. A. who has started a plan where he conducts the Sunday services in the auditorium as usual, but during the week he is organizing the members to meet in their homes all round the city for prayer and Bible study. This certainly seems a step in the right direction.

We have met other ministers who hold meetings for prayer, fellowship and Bible study in their manse, encouraging all the people to take as much part as possible, while they themselves do their best to keep in the background.

One thing is certain: most ministers are very discouraged by the small amount of truth that members of their congregations are able to absorb simply by sitting in the pew listening to messages from the pulpit. A great many deplore the low standard of spirituality that our modern methods of church gathering produce. All the improvements that human ingenuity and modern science can place at our disposal have been tried here and there, but with little lasting effect. Could it be that the simple methods so successful in Bible days,

described and advocated in God's own Word, are the very methods which we need today?

The situation calls for much prayer and a willingness to act in accordance to Bible truth rather than along the lines of mere human tradition or expedience.

"TO HIM THAT KNOWETH TO DO GOOD AND DOETH IT NOT, TO HIM IT IS SIN." James 4:17

The writer would be glad to hear from any groups who have had some experience of working along the lines suggested, or from any who are led to revive the "Church in the Home" in this way. Any criticism or suggestions will be welcomed.