

Stay With The Church

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(First published in The Pentecostal Evangel, August 11, 1974)

It was an old story. I had heard it before, and now I was hearing it again.

This time it came from the middle-aged man who responded to my knock on his door. My wife and I introduced ourselves with a smile and invited him to attend our church.

"I don't have to go to church to be a Christian," he retorted with an unmistakable air of self-sufficiency. "I can be a Christian and stay right here at home."

As tactfully as possible we tried to impress on him the importance of attending the means of grace.

Several days later he was in my study, repeating his assertion he could be a Christian without coming to church.

Frankly (and perhaps not so tactfully this time) I said to him, "If I and the people of this congregation followed your example, we would close the doors of this church and all stay home. We wouldn't have church, and we wouldn't accomplish much for God in this community either."

That ended the matter.

Of course, circumstances do prevent some Christians from attending church regularly. God's grace is sufficient in such circumstances to keep believers true to God. They can be Christians, even though they are not always able to be in church.

Still there's a lot of truth in the old saying, "A person can be a Christian and not go to church, but a person cannot be a Christian and not want to go to church."

Generally folk who won't serve God in church won't serve Him at home either. When such people get genuinely converted, they are eager to live for Christ everywhere--at home, at school, at work, and in church.

But there's another problem, a big one in some places. Anti-institutionalism is part of the spirit of our times. Established structures are under attack, including the church.

Now some of this is bad, but perhaps some good will result. Perhaps the world would be better off if the ecclesiastical institutions that long ago lost their spiritual life were forced to revitalize their faith or go out of business.

A real problem arises, however, when Christians withdraw from the organized body of evangelical believers and try to live in spiritual isolation.

Of course, individual adjustments within the body of Christ do become necessary sometimes.

For example, a charismatic Christian in an evangelical but anticharismatic church might find it necessary to change church affiliation for the good of all concerned. But such

adjustments should take place within the visible body of Christ and should never involve separation from it.

Many charismatics are able to live the Spirit-filled life in evangelical but noncharismatic churches without disrupting the church or rejecting the position and leadership of the pastor. They have broad-minded, understanding pastors who are glad to have them in the congregation, pastors who know how to utilize their talents for service in the local church.

These charismatics have found fulfillment where they can. And they are humble and cooperative, realizing the Holy Spirit produces unity, not dissension, in the body of Christ.

So the blessing and the fruit of the Spirit in their lives make them a living testimony in their churches of the reality of the Pentecostal experience.

On the other hand, many charismatics no longer fit into their noncharismatic churches. What should they do?

Should they remain there as frustrated sources of agitation and disruption, forever challenging the pastor on matters pertaining to the Holy Spirit, never finding acceptance and fulfillment in service?

Should they withdraw and try to live outside the institutional church, without a pastor, finding fellowship with other charismatics only in share meetings in restaurants and homes?

The answer to all of this is no. If the old bottle is rigid and inflexible, the new wine will break it and be spilled. Put the new wine into a new bottle, and both will be preserved (Matthew 9:17).

Rather than cause serious problems in their old churches, such persons should find a full gospel church where they will find acceptance and a place of service, become a part of it, and be faithful to it. In this way peace is maintained within the whole body of Christ without compromise or frustration.

Nondenominational or interfaith charismatic meetings have their place as opportunities for supplemental fellowship. But they are never a substitute for the church. They should never be used as a means of avoiding responsibility to the local church.

Home prayer meetings and Bible studies can be beneficial so long as they are conducted by the church as part of its total fellowship and outreach. If those who participate stay in God's scriptural order (Ephesians 4:1-16; Hebrews 13:17), blessing and good can result.

But when a few become lifted up with spiritual pride, confusion and division follow. Then the church is hurt, and the Holy Spirit is grieved.

So watch for these danger signals:

1. A man or woman shows signs of wanting to be a leader and begins building a sphere of influence in the congregation, pulling her or his special group away from the influence of the pastor.
2. Prayer, praise, or study meetings begins in the home or homes of a few, usually revolving around the personality of the leader. Was the pastor not invited, and do the participants feel uncomfortable if he happens to drop in?

3. The home meetings become little "bless-me clubs," with a heavy emphasis on singing and praise, but with little or no burden for the lost. Intercessory prayer is largely absent.

The group seems to close itself in within four walls and pretend it is in heaven already, forgetting a lost world outside. The participants enjoy an easy spiritual experience, one that demands little consecration to the responsibilities of real service.

4. The presence and power of the Holy Spirit, intended to sanctify the believer, reveal the deep things of God, and give power for witnessing and service, become distorted into little more than a Pentecostal joyride or charismatic ego trip.

Responsibilities become neglected, both at home and at church. The group begins to feel it is a church within a church, made up of the superspiritual elite.

5. The authority of Scripture gives way to direction by spiritual gifts.

The pastor teaches and preaches to these folks in vain because, though spiritually immature, they are unteachable. It is beneath their spiritual pride and dignity to submit to the office of the pastor, the authority of the church, or even the admonitions of Scripture.

Does any of this sound familiar? Do you recognize any of these symptoms in the body of Christ? If so, the therapy of humility is needed without delay!

Why?

Because if these things continue, they will bring harm. People will leave the church. Some will be lost. Others will wander as sheep separated from the flock, perpetually immature Christians, always unteachable in their high spiritual self-image.

The church will lose them as productive fellow-laborers in the gospel. Their homes will suffer. Their children will be subjected to an unstable spiritual environment, never enjoying a real sense of belonging.

So stay with the church. Support it with your faithful attendance, your prayers, your stewardship, your willing service.

Stay with it when things are going smoothly and the tide of revival is high. Stay with it when it goes through trouble, when people are leaving, the finances are low, and the pastor and congregation are discouraged.

You need the church, and the church needs you.

The program of the church provides unique opportunities for cooperative Christian service. You need those opportunities. Find your place of ministry in the church and be faithful in it (1 Corinthians 12:18).

We need the fellowship of other Christians (Hebrews 10:25). We need to worship God in the whole congregation (Psalm 111:1). We need to listen regularly to the preaching of God's Word. We need to minister and we need to be ministered to.

And every Christian needs a pastor and needs to honor and respect him. A believer without a pastor is out of God's order.

Though it is not perfect yet, the Church is Christ's own special institution, built upon the rock of His deity (Matthew 16:16-18). According to Ephesians 5:25-27, Christ gave himself for the Church that He might perfect it.

And that's a process we all want to be in on.