



Issachar Comments Papers

Expounding biblical concepts on the world scene today

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SAVING THE CHURCH

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Great expectations surround the appointment of new leaders to the two largest Christian churches. A new Pope to lead the worldwide Roman Catholic Church and a new Archbishop of Canterbury to lead the worldwide Anglican Communion is giving hope to millions of Christians that this may be a turning point in history. For half a century the churches have been in decline throughout the Western nations, battling against the onslaught of secularism from outside and the growth of corrupting forces from inside.

Both leaders have to face the enormous credibility gap that exists between the church and the general population in the Western nations. Sexual abuse, financial scandals and inept leadership have made a hugely negative impact which the new leaders will have to overcome if Christianity is to play a creative role in addressing the vast social and economic challenges of this present age.

Losing Trust

The great shaking of the nations foretold in Scripture has been revealing corruption both in the church and in secular institutions. The Cyprus crisis, although only involving a small island, is of huge significance in revealing the depths of the moral as well as the economic bankruptcy of the European nations. Depositors who had put their money into a bank for safekeeping suddenly found that far from their money being safe, it was stolen from them - the biggest bank robbery in history! This is employing moral bankruptcy to combat economic bankruptcy. It simply will not work. It may solve the immediate problem but in the long term it will prove disastrous. Banking, like all commercial transactions requires trust. Once that trust is broken the floodgates of anarchy are opened and there is no way back.

In a similar way the whole mission of the Church depends upon trust. If people cannot trust the leaders, the message has no credibility. The way the Catholic Church handled the abuse scandals by moving priests around and trying to cover up their crimes was a betrayal of trust which the world will not easily forget. In a similar way the spiritual bankruptcy of the Church of England was revealed in the controversy over women bishops and by the inept way they handled the St Paul's protesters. A great opportunity to present the gospel in the heart of the City of London was squandered amid fears of a loss of income from visitors and anxiety over damage to the building if they allowed the protesters to come inside out of the cold!

False Hopes

Nevertheless, hopes are high that the new church leaders may pave the way to a new era in the history of the Western church. I want to say that these hopes are like a house built upon sand that cannot stand in the coming storm. This statement is not based upon the ferocity of the storm but upon the fundamental weakness of the church.

The sustained attack upon the Christian faith by secularists, humanists and homosexuals in the past two decades has produced a social climate in which Christians are facing a period of persecution from a new and growing breed of aggressive Christophobics. In church history this is nothing new. This is a repeat of the social climate in which the New Testament church was conceived. The church, in those days, had the ability to stand against persecution. Today, that ability is missing.

Strength of Faith

It was against a background of violent persecution that the Apostles urged the infant church to become firmly bonded to Jesus in order to be able to withstand the unjust and cruel charges that were brought against them by those who hated the name of Jesus and sought to rid the world of his followers. The fact that they survived three centuries of cruel persecution was only possible due to the unshakable quality of their faith and the 'koinonia' or 'fellowship' structure of the church.

The strength of the church in New Testament times did not lie in a powerful organisation such as that of today. It was simply a loose association of local 'fellowships of believers' who shared a common faith in the Risen Lord Jesus. Its strength lay, not in an organisational structure, but in the quality of each individual's faith. It was their daily experience of the presence of the Risen Jesus and the evidence of the exercise of spiritual gifts that he had distributed among them that gave them the confidence to stand up against hostile neighbours and authorities who had the power to condemn them to cruel deaths in public arenas.

No Priests

The church of the first three centuries was not a leadership-dependent organisation. The concept of priests had yet to be introduced to the church. This is why there is no mention of priests in the churches of the New Testament or in the writings of Paul or the other Apostles. It is true that Peter says that all the believers in Jesus are "*a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God,*" but he uses this term to describe the whole body of believers and their mission to serve God in the world.

The equivalent teaching in Paul is in 1 Corinthians 12 where he likens the whole fellowship of believers to a human body made up of many parts. Although they had different functions they all formed one body and no one part had greater honour or status than any other part. It was on the basis of this essential equality that Paul was able to appeal to each individual member to recognise the different gifts that each had been given. The health of the body depended upon each part carrying out its particular function and honouring one another.

Secular Church Models

The two largest Christian Churches today, the Catholic and the Anglican, have drifted far away from this New Testament concept of the Church. The Catholics have adopted a hierarchical business model presided over by a pontiff elected by an executive board of directors (Cardinals) and the Anglicans have chosen a parliamentary model with representatives sent to a synod where votes are taken to determine policy and government. These two models stand in contrast to the New Testament Church where the presence of Jesus was the only authority and the Holy Spirit directed the mission of the Church.

Survival

If Christianity in the Western nations is to survive the onslaught of secular humanism in the coming decades of this century there not only has to be radical changes in the whole structure and function of the Church but there has to be a rediscovery of its essential mission under the Lordship of Jesus in the body of believers.

It was the strength of faith of every believer that enabled the church to withstand the 10 periods of violent and cruel persecution of the first three centuries. That faith was not dependent upon professional priests or a powerful organisation; it was solely dependent upon the relationship between each believer and Jesus. Therein lies the key to saving the church today.

Spiritual Battle

The great shaking the nations will continue for some time into the future as God exposes the corruption at the heart of our civilisation. The coming spiritual battle is likely to result in the widespread dissolution of the organisational structure of the Christian church. But this may be exactly according to the will of God for his church so that believers will stop being clergy-dependent and looking to the organisation for support but will look only to Jesus. He is the only one who can save his church.

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