

Isolationism

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The world was recently shocked when a religious sect, after murdering a United States Congressman and three newsmen, committed mass suicide, covering the commune of Jonestown, Guyana with 914 rotting corpses of black and white men, women and children. I was reminded of a similar retreat over twenty years ago when a preacher from Houston, Texas led a group of people into the jungles of Venezuela just Northwest of Guyana and set up a commune. Happily, this commune was forced to break up and come back to the U.S because of troubles with the government and severe economical problems. They later resettled in South Carolina.

But all the basic elements of the Guyana commune were present, and still are present in the commune which was in Venezuela. A strong, powerfully gifted on-man authority figure who demands and obtains unquestioned obedience. An issue or issues over which to prophesy impending disaster, or religious, social or moral corruption. A group of disillusioned, dissatisfied, irresponsible people who are too confused and uncertain to think for themselves and who are unwilling to face the challenges of living in a hostile world.

Multitudes of other religious communes, communities, sects and cults exist today on the same principles. The only thing that keeps any or all of them from going as far as the People's Temple did is a leader with as much demonic power to go as far as Jim Jones.

The church of the Lord Jesus Christ is said to be "the light of the world," "a lighted candle that must not be covered," "a city set on a hill that cannot be hid." It is expressly sent forth to spread its influence among all mankind, to propagate the gospel of the kingdom of light in the midst of the kingdoms of darkness. It is a salt to be sprinkled and intermingled among all peoples of the earth. God has gifted it with a message as universal as mankind. It has in its hands the keys of the kingdom . . . the message and means of the grace of God whereby men, upon their reception, may be saved, or, upon their rejection, may be eternally damned. All it binds is bound and all it looses is loosed. The gospel proclaimed by the church has within it all the answers to all of man's problems. Indeed, that gospel is the only answer to the perplexities of men. It may be said with dogmatic certainty that only the church of the Lord Jesus Christ has anything to say that is worth saying or worth the listener's time today. It is the only true light now in this world of deep spiritual darkness.

Not only is the church exposed and spread out everywhere in order to perform its mission: It must be constantly intermingling within itself! Its head is Christ "from whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted together by that which *every joint* supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of *every part* . . ." (Ephesians 4:16). The Body is one, and it catholic (not Roman). It is universal in scope . . . world wide. We have local churches, indeed, but none that measure up to the description which we have of the complete body described in Ephesians 4:8-16. No local church, no matter how big, has all the necessary ministries and gifts essential for growing healthy Christians. That being true, then each church *must* have the fellowship and ministries of other churches, or suffer spiritual deformity. I am not speaking of some humanistic, political Church of the Lord Jesus Christ that is made up of the spiritual unity and fellowship of all local churches.

In view of the foregoing, it would seem obvious that few things need be guarded against and avoided with more caution than isolationism. No terms could be more self contradictory than Christianity and Isolationism. Yet it is a trap that is constantly ensnaring Christians, churches and denominations.

One might wonder, in the face of all scripture and self-evident reasons, why this might be. A simple answer, of course, would be: That is the way the Enemy wants it. He knows that a sure way to put out a

fire is to scatter the wood and isolate the embers. Each burning coal, left to itself without the kindling support of others soon cools and dies out. But why is the Enemy so successful in employing this tactic? A number of reasons, I think.

“Christian” communes or communities are usually set up to escape world pressures, to flee from real or imagined civil and political calamities. As far as possible, they are made self-sustaining with as many goods and services provided within the community itself as possible. The only contact with the outside world is that which is necessary to obtain what cannot be produced in the commune.

Among the most notable of such communities are the early Mennonites, Amish and the Amana settlements of Iowa. Scores of other religious and Christian groups have attempted such communities with less lasting success. We are brought to admire much of what the Amish have succeeded in retaining of strong home and family principles, an impressive outward display of morality and ethics. But a brief encounter with their religious views will demonstrate that they know little of dynamic evangelical Christianity. Much has become external form and ceremony, far more simple than that of “High Church Lutheranism,” to be sure, but little more evangelical. Liberal Mennonites have abandoned communal life; and the Amana settlements have become industrialized and religion has become a minor factor.

Often communities begin with sound evangelical Christians. But deprived of the pressures, persecutions, conflicts, challenges, temptations, testings, contradictions and adversities *which the Lord has ordained* as a means to purify and build us up, they never develop spiritual muscle. Given a set of rules of Christian behaviour which is equated as holiness and spirituality, they never are shut up to the righteousness which comes through the victorious indwelling Christ.

These are perilous days. The world and world system is indeed becoming so corrupt that there are fewer and fewer areas wherein the Christian can move without becoming adversely affected. There are some places from which we must flee as Lot from Sodom. We are being compelled to find alternative ways of educating our children because of the perversities, lies and corruption they are forced to face in the government schools. Measures need be taken that we may survive to give a witness to the world we are told to evangelize. But we must never cut ourselves off from the very lost sinners to whom God’s warning and gospel is sent.

Every generation has its own scores of isolation movements. The town of Zion, Illinois was founded on such a movement. We have recently seen the demise of the “Children of God” and many other like sects of the Jesus People of the 1960’s and early 1970’s. A religious group recently bought the whole town of Bridgeville, California, but soon went bankrupt, broke up and scattered. The oncoming generations will do the same thing and fare no better.

Men still persist in attempting what the Lord never commanded, never blessed and which has never survived politically or economically. The fact is, the church is not a political or economical entity. It is a spiritual force exercising spiritual authority and witness among all the economical and political entities of this world. It is not the soup, but the salt in the soup; not the house, but the light in the house; not the man, but the life in the man.

A less radical form of group isolationism is practiced by Christian denominations or movements either within or among denominations. Leaders of such denominations or movements become convinced that they are the only ones standing for evangelical truth. Railing, criticizing, and constantly pointing out the errors of others, they soon infect their followers with this same fanatical self-righteousness.

These do not isolate themselves from the world, but from all other Christians who do not hold their peculiar views. Usually the points of difference are made their main message. Thus one group may readily be identified because its preachers are always harping on water baptism. Another on a particular mode or formula of water baptism. Another on the name of its church. Another on a particular supernatural phenomena as speaking in tongues. Another on the “Five Points.” Another on legalistic shibboleth such as length of hair, mode of dress, certain foods and drinks, and a trunk full of other such commandments of men. Still another waxes eloquent only on a particular view of prophecy. This constant over-emphasis

upon such things, naturally keep these things foremost in their minds. Their *differences* with other Christians become the object of their zeal and affections, thus usurping the place of God and acting as functional idolatry. Naturally, these people refuse to fellowship with anyone outside their own narrowly defined non-essential essentials. If they do not view all others as lost, they consider them too inferior in spiritual life to have any mutual ground to share. Needless to say, Christians brought up in such an isolated movement are cursed with the worst sort of biblical and theological ignorance, having only those few controversial items fed to them as a constant diet.

A variation of the above are the “come out” movements. Most of these are strongly opinionated people who have grown sick of mechanical and political religion and have been turned off on all forms of “organized churches.”

Once again we must note that every generation has had its “prophets” to whom “the Lord revealed that Revelation 18:4 is now being fulfilled, and that Babylon is any organized church, and that God’s people are to come out of all organized churches.” Such prophets generally mean by “come out,” “come to me.” And the alternative to organized churches is a disorganized church or an order that the prophet himself has devised.

It is true that the harlot church and local harlot churches do exist. They have always existed since the first century. God’s people certainly ought have to part with them. But a few observations need to be made.

1. God has never told us to separate from other Christians, other believers, except when sin and immoral behavior makes disciplinary measures necessary. And in such cases it is the wayward brother who is isolated in hope of his repentance. We are said to be members one of another, of the same body, partakers together of Christ, and in vital union with Christ and each other. It is unbelievers, unrighteousness, darkness, Belial, infidels, idolators, demon worshippers, that we are told to come out from among (2 Corinthians 6:14-18). We have no part with them, they are not of us, there is no common ground, and we lose nothing from the loss of their “fellowship.” Not so with fellow believers. We cripple both ourselves and them when we separate from them.
2. There are times when a believer, upon finding himself in an apostate church, must walk out. No longer is Christ preached, no longer is there spiritual life, no longer does gospel light shine from its midst. There is no spiritual communion there, and he ought to leave it, find a church that is alive in Christ or else help begin one. But when a person leaves such a church, he has no warrant to brand all organized churches as harlots. Nor can he prove that all churches of that denomination are harlots. All he knows is that that one is. He may think he has a revelation from God that all churches of such a name are harlots, but he is likely in a vain delusion.

When a man leaves an apostate church, he should become a part of another church, not start a come-out movement and begin pointing a finger and yelling “harlot” at everything he sees. The only way to avoid the curses of isolationism when you get out of a religious mess is to plunge yourself into the living body of Christ and maintain your fellowship, and, as far as possible, your walk with other believers.

3. God has, at times in Christian history, been pleased to raise up mighty men of faith and courage and vision who were His instruments in movements of spiritual reform and revival. Not a single one of these men were “come-outers.” They were all kicked out. Their original burden and design was not to start a new movement, separated from the rest of the Christian world, with their own names at the top, but to reform, awaken, correct the church they were in. Luther, Zwingli and Calvin were all forced out of the church they sought to correct. Whitfield and Wesley had no idea of being anything but Anglican ministers. Their messages froze them out of the church buildings and God blessed their preaching in

the open fields. The centuries since have confirmed the blessing of the Lord on those ministries while multitudes of come-outers have fizzled out and been forgotten. It is an embittered, rebellious, deluded egotist that says, "Come out from them to us." It is a genuine shepherd of the flock of God who says, "Come to Christ and find rest for your souls."

One of the worst forms of Isolationism is the One Man Empire." Often it begins something like this: A preacher notes a weakness, an ignoring of certain truths, an error being practiced by the established churches. He takes this opportunity to begin to draw followers to himself, pointing out that he is the only one teaching the truth. All others are in obvious error. If he is a skilled orator, especially good at polemics . . . cutting down and ridiculing his opponents, and a good promoter, he can quickly gather a following from those who have been disillusioned disgusted, starved or embittered by their previous religious affiliations.

This sort of empire depends on one thing more than anything else. The one cohesive element that cements it together is the fact that their man is the *only* one preaching truth. Therefore, he dare not endorse another man's ministry lest he pull the prop out from under his own. Nor can he afford to be teaching at any time what anyone else is. So when others are found to be teaching the same truth he has been teaching, he is forced to find another "new truth" to keep the illusion alive that he alone is God's living oracle. Obviously, he will soon run out of sound truth that is sensational and exotic enough to satisfy the carnal itching of his followers' ears. He is then obliged to come up with either "new revelations" or distorted interpretations to support the now false doctrines he is espousing. One may well see how fatal this is to the doctrinal views and spiritual life of his followers.

Some examples of this type of empire are found in Col. Bob Thieme of Houston, Texas, the late L. R. Shelton of New Orleans, Louisiana, and Herbert Armstrong. It is not fair to lump all these men in the same pod, however, since most of Shelton's ministry was doctrinally sound and practically all of Armstrong's is false. But they all achieved the same end. They effectually separated their followers from all of Christendom to themselves exclusively.

Sometimes this empire is built up in a wide-spread influence through radio, TV, tapes and literature. More often, however, it is a local church thing. The "Super-Churches" of today are one variation of it. Jack Hyles, Lee Robertson, and Jerry Falwell are some of the leaders of the Super-Church psychology.

In the Super-Churches, the emphasis is not so much on doctrine taught as it is on bald-faced self-centeredness. It is a magnificent ego fest. Its theme is "How great we are." Votaries are constantly brainwashed into thinking "we are the greatest," "we are doing the most," "our pastor is the best," "God has raised us up for great things." The pastor diligently shields his people from contact or involvement with *any* other Christian or church activity or ministry, lest they learn that they have been lied to, cheated of much needed truth, and exploited as pawns to build this man's own personal empire. He does this by:

1. Keeping them busy with feverishly promoted activities so that they are too exhausted to muster interest in anything else,
2. Warning them that they will get poisoned or contaminated by contact with other Christian groups,
3. Accusing them of disloyalty if they show any interest in anyone or anything outside their church,
4. Getting them so financially involved and obligated in his machine that they feel that they that they have too much invested to lose, therefore they are willingly blind to the spiritual contradictions they see.

Many one-man empires are quite small. The preacher either does not have the abilities to gather such a large following, or his godly conscience will not allow him to deliberately pervert truth and subvert the people necessary to build such an empire. The pastor of such a small isolated church is usually severely limited in doctrinal knowledge and quite dogmatic and defensive of the narrow spectrum he teaches. It is all the people ever hear. The ego song, also, is to a different tune. Instead of "How great we are," it is "We

thank thee that we are not as others.” Where others are proud of their great size, these are proud of their smallness.

It must be conceded that in both large and small isolated churches, if there is any sound gospel at all preached, some are converted to Christ. For this we praise God. It is God Who give the increase in spite of all our error. But we would that all of God’s people would bury their hatchets, throw out their paranoia, burn their idols, renounce their vain ambitions, and with a glimpse of the glory of God revealed in the beauty and perfections of the full Body of Christ, come out of their shells, embrace their brothers and sisters in Christ and give a unified witness to Christ the Savior before this lost and dying world.

- C. M.