



The Reflector

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WHEN GOD'S PEOPLE BEGIN TO THINK BIG

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Ever since God has had a chosen people, they have sought out ways to magnify themselves – their importance, their wisdom, their strength – rather than magnifying the importance, wisdom, and strength of their God.

The Israelites were God's first chosen people, that is to say the first people set apart from all others to be God's own peculiar people. "For thou art an holy people unto the LORD thy God, and the LORD hath chosen thee to be a peculiar people unto himself, above all the nations that are upon the earth." (Deut. 14:2). Almost from the beginning they complained against God's way and sought out their own.

After entering the promised land, the Israelite tribes managed to function for about 400 years without a strong central government. God was their only king. During this period, God raised up judges to deliver them from the oppression of their neighbors when and where needed. In time, this arrangement became unsatisfactory to the children of Israel. *They began to think BIG.* They petitioned God through Samuel, the last of the judges, for an earthly king. They had arrived! They wanted more than an invisible King to preside over the nation. They wanted a highly visible central government (a king) that could rival and compete with the other nations of the world. As they put it, "That we also may be like all the nations; and that our king may judge us, and go out before us, and fight our battles." (1 Sam. 8:20). As God sometime does, he eventually granted them their wish as a judgment against them. He warned of the heavy taxes that would be imposed upon them

and the loss of freedom for their sons and daughters. Much of their property would be confiscated to support the bureaucracy – the servants of the king (Read all of 1 Sam. ch. 8). They replied, "But we will have a king." Someone has said that an unanswerable argument is: "We want it, we're going to have it, what are you going to do about it?" I must admit that this is a hard argument with which to deal.

Even though God used the kings to facilitate his grand purpose, the history of Israel under their rule was not good. After only three kings, the nation divided into two kingdoms, never again to be united. It is of little benefit to speculate what things would have been like, had they not demanded a king. God gave them what they asked for and they reaped the consequences. The basic problem was that God's way seemed too small and insignificant in the eyes of his people, compared to the perceived strength of their neighbors. They forgot one important factor in the equation – they had God on their side.

God's Other Chosen People

The Israelites are no longer God's chosen people. Christians are. Collectively they are called the *church* (Gr. *ekklesia* - called-out assembly). Peter, in 1 Peter 2, refers to them as a "chosen nation" and a "peculiar people" – terms similar to those used of Israel in Deuteronomy.

This church, composed of *all* of God's people, is not an organization. It is not a physical assembly. It has reference to all the redeemed of all time. This is indi-

cated by the Hebrew writer, “To the general assembly and church of the firstborn, which are written in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect, and to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling, that speaketh better things than Abel. (Hebrews 12:23-24). “First-born” is plural, meaning the firstborn *ones*. This refers to that great host whose names are written in heaven. This church has no earthly headquarters, nor earthly head. It never comes together in a physical assembly. It has no place to assemble on the earth. It is a brotherhood made up of the children of God. It is all the saved added together (Acts 2:47). There are no nationwide, statewide, countywide, nor citywide organizations for this people. Search the Scriptures to see if this was not the case with the early Christians.

The only organizational structure, for God’s people is the congregation or church in the local sense. We read of the “church at” such and such place. (Cf. 1 Cor. 1:2; 2 Cor. 1:1). Or we read of churches (plural), referring to local groups of God’s people in different locations (cf. Romans 16:16). These churches assembled for public worship, contributed into a common treasury, supported gospel preaching/teaching to sinners and saints, and cared for the needy among the saints (Heb. 10:25; Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:1-2; 2 Cor. 11:8). This arrangement is sufficient for those who trust in God’s wisdom and power to accomplish what he wants us to do as his people on the earth.

The sad history of God’s people in this dispensation is they have not long been satisfied with God’s arrangement. Like his people of the past dispensation, they have had a propensity to think BIG. In a relative few years after the establishment of the church, they found a way to organize themselves into units larger than local churches. The spirit of apostasy, waiting for opportunity to manifest itself, was already at work in the minds and attitudes of some in Paul’s day. He called it “the mystery of iniquity (or lawlessness)” (2 Thess. 2:7). The apostasy began with activating God’s elect people in arrangements larger than the local churches. My

college world history textbook, “Civilization Past and Present, *third edition*,” under the heading “The Development of Church Offices,” states: “*At the first the officials were called elders, or presbyters; they were also referred to as bishops, or overseers. By the second century, the office of bishop and presbyter had become distinct. The bishop now had the right to enforce obedience from his presbyters and other subordinates such as stewards and recorders. New churches organized in the country adjacent to the mother church, which was usually located in a city, were administered by presbyters responsible to the bishop. Thus, administrative divisions evolved, called a diocese, under the jurisdiction of a bishop.*” The trend toward bigger organization continued on until there was a universal (catholic) head, the pope, with universal headquarters in Rome. Along with super organization came doctrinal corruption. The bigger the organization, the greater the corruption. Much of recorded history of the church has been that of the apostate church, and efforts to reform it – a futile effort, indeed.



The “Restoration Movement” of the late 1700s and 1800's emphasized *restoration* rather than *reformation*. It pointed people back of the apostate church and the reformation efforts to the New Testament to the original plan of salvation as it was before it was corrupted by the apostasy. Many obeyed that simple gospel plan in many communities. Local churches were formed in community after community without any denominational affiliation. But it was not long until the people began to think big again. Some of the prominent names of this worthy movement did not think that local congregations were capable of doing the great work of evangelizing the world without additional organization. In the early 1800s brethren organized “cooperation meetings” to more efficiently preach the gospel. These meetings were convened to plan work beyond that which they believed local churches were capable of doing. These meetings kind of evolved into organized societies to support evangelistic work. In 1849, in Cincinnati Ohio, the American Christian Missionary Society was formed. The brotherhood in America had become more than a relationship. It now had organized structure – an organizational entity. Its advocates maintained that its purpose was not to supplant local churches, but to complement their work by providing the means for them to cooperate in order to carry out the great commission. Membership in this new society was held by churches and individual Christians.

Much like the Great Apostasy, doctrinal innovations came with the efforts to organize beyond the congregational level. Within 10 years of the organizing of the American Christian Missionary Society, instrumental music was introduced into the worship of local churches. In the years that followed all kinds of innovations were introduced. The American Christian Missionary Society later merged with other societies to form the United Christian Missionary Society. This society became the titular head of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). Any similarity between the churches that follow the missionary society movement today and the churches that were established during the early years of the Restoration Movement is purely

coincidental. The social gospel, denominational originated practices, and rank modernism abounds. It all started when brethren began to think BIG. They looked for ways to activate the universal church, at least large segments of it. From the beginning of this movement toward centralization there was opposition. The end results was that, while a majority went with the innovators, there was a goodly number that did not. These continued to function as autonomous local congregations and as individual Christians. Their numbers swelled during the first half of the 20th century, while for the most part the membership rolls of the congregations affiliated with the “Christian Church” dwindled.

After World War II, brethren began to think BIG again. The beast of centralization raised its ugly head once again. The brethren found ways to combine the work of local congregations into a central agency. Benevolent institutions were formed that let the churches combine much of their benevolent funds under a central board, or in few cases, a central eldership. “Sponsoring churches” were formed to allow churches to put their evangelistic funds under the oversight of a central eldership. As the years passed, most of the churches that went in that direction embraced other innovations into their work and worship. While most of these churches still designate themselves as “churches of Christ” they are a far cry from what the churches were before they began to think BIG. They have added social and recreational programs, facilities and “ministries” unknown to the New Testament churches. In some cases the worship has been corrupted by a lack of real gospel preaching, contemporary style worship, and other innovations borrowed from the denominational neighbors.

Winston Churchill is quoted as saying, “those that fail to learn from history, are doomed to repeat it.” This is as true of church history as it is secular history. The road to Rome is paved with small organizational steppingstones away from congregations and individual Christians doing the Lord’s work toward greater organization of the Lord’s people.

Given the New Testament pattern of early Chris-

tians' being only organized into *local* functioning units, called churches; and given the terrible history of what has happened when brethren have set out to activate the brotherhood, we would do well to be suspicious of any moves that smack of centralization. Any effort to *organize* individual Christians and/or congregations into a central organization is a step in the wrong direction. Likewise, any effort to *convene* the brotherhood, or a large portion of it, should also be watched – not matter what the venue may be. It can easily take on the form of a brotherhood convention. It does not matter who convenes it. Nor does it matter if it is a gathering of brethren officially representing local churches or one of brethren acting on their own, it is a step toward activating the universal church. There is neither authority for brotherhood-wide organizations nor brotherhood-wide conventions. We would do well to be content to do our spiritual work as individuals working alone, working *concurrently* with other individuals, or working *jointly* with other Christians in local churches. We know this to be authorized. This generation may not take its small steps toward centralization to their ultimate and logical end. But history has shown that each generation builds on the work of the preceding generation. Any step away from the New Testament pattern lays the groundwork for the next generation to add its steps, so that in a relative short time an apostasy is full grown.

There's a time to think big. When local churches are planning the amount of evangelism both at home and abroad they need to do, they need to think big. When individual Christians go about doing their "personal work" they need to think big. Both churches and individuals need to desire to do as much as they can to work the work of God in the world. But just as we are not to think more highly of ourselves that we ought to think, we should not think any bigger than we ought to think. When it comes to organizing the Lord's chosen people, bigger is not better.

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PRIORITY OF TRUTH

W. E. Brightwell

If we are trying to go to heaven and take everybody with us we can, we will have to place truth above the desire for peace and progress.

1) **Truth must Have Priority over Friendship:** Differences are unpleasant. There is no excuse for them unless they in some way affect our reaching our destination. Truth is more important than friendship. It is not a friendly act to compromise the truth. Love for friends demands that love of truth be put first (Jno. 8:32).

2) **Truth must Have Priority over Courtesy:** John sets the limitations of courtesy where truth is involved: "If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house, neither bid him God speed: For he that biddeth him God speed is partaker of his evil deeds" (2 Jno. 9-11).

3) **Truth must Have Priority over Peace, Unity and Fellowship:** Those are more desirable. We have preached millions of sermons on "unity." It is sad we cannot enjoy more of it. But these things are results, not goals. They follow conformity to the truth as naturally as night follows day or as water runs down hill. "If we walk in the light as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another... ." (1 Jn. 1:7). Would it not be better, to preach more on loyalty to God and His truth, and let the peace, unity and fellowship come in their natural order?

The notion that we should sacrifice truth to keep peace in the family, make "party" progress, is equally vicious and more formidable than any false doctrine which is proclaimed. We must continue to fight error or else become a denomination, like the rest. Which shall it be—truth, or party?

But the wisdom that is from above is **first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be intreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy.** (Jas. 3:17)
