

*VISITING A CHURCH,
FIRST CENTURY, A.D.*

Studies In Bible Doctrine

by

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During the first century A.D. there was great turmoil; for God's Son, Jesus Christ, had come as promised for thousands of years by Old Testament prophets; and had set up the New Testament or New Covenant between God and mankind. The Apostles of Jesus Christ had the responsibility to proclaim this new Gospel Covenant and its requirements to all men.

Rather than working through a nation of people (the Hebrews) to reach men with the truth; Jesus set up a spiritual kingdom on earth known as the New Testament Church. Through this body of believers, the Church, Christ works on earth. We are his hands, feet, voice, -- his body on earth.

In the nation of Israel God always had a remnant of faithful believers; but unlike the nation of Israel, the Church **is** to be the **remnant** -- citizens of Heaven, not of earth. Groups who profess to be followers of Jesus and part of the true Church; yet do not live according to Jesus' teachings and commands, are really not part of Christ's Church. According to Scripture, if a person wasn't living holy, they were put out of the church, so the assembly would remain holy as the body of Christ on earth. (I Peter 2:9; I John 2:4; I Corinthians 5:1-13)

Though there were continuous assaults on the church by Satan's false prophets and false professors; these were not to be tolerated within the body, but judged, and disciplined out of the church. If a believer began to waver and wander from the right path, they were confronted by the brethren. If they didn't repent to be restored into fellowship, they were put out of the fellowship, until they did repent. Paul had taught them, "A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump"; so they were taught to put away from themselves evil doers.

Because Satan is alive, the churches were not without trouble. However, they were victorious in these trials as long as they followed the Apostle's teachings. Those assemblies who strayed from the Apostle's teachings were shunned by the faithful assemblies, and became apostate. Though they remained in existence, and were sometimes very powerful, they were not a true "Church of Jesus Christ". In Revelation Jesus warned churches to repent or come to this fate. Many churches today are very successful in the eyes of man; but have already been rejected by Jesus, and so are utter failures in reality.

There are thousands of "churches" today claiming to be a true "Church of Jesus Christ"; but only those assemblies who hold to "all things whatsoever Jesus commanded" and all the Apostle's teachings and commands in the New Testament are eligible to make such a claim. Don't follow the wicked Romish church to study church history. Follow the history of the faithful martyrs and preachers who held to the Scriptural faith and life.

When painting a picture of "visiting a first century church"; I am going to focus on the normal church situation, not the times of trial and controversy. We will not focus on the Laodiceans, Diotrephes, nor the leaven that was continually put away from the body. It would be unfair to the faithful, self sacrificing, God fearing, holy living believers who were the pillars and backbone of the churches that evangelized the then known world; died at the stake; were cast to lions; and faithfully served Jesus -- it would be unfair to them to focus on the trouble-makers that they had to deal with. I would not want to be lumped together with people and problems that grieve me, and are a disgrace to what I stand for. We should not be so proud and wise in our own conceit that we can't appreciate the valor and purity of the first century believers. When we look at Peter's life: to focus on his failures, and not rejoice in his victories, only reveals the wicked heart within us.

We are going to visit one of the faithful churches, and see how different they were from what we see today. The things that we will notice, will be the "norm" for all the churches: Things they all had in common, when not in the midst of a great trial.

VISITING A FIRST CENTURY CHURCH

It is the first day of the week, which is Sunday. To the believers, this is the "Lord's Day". It is the day Jesus rose from the dead; the day He repeatedly met with them when He appeared to them at different times before His ascension; the day when the Holy Spirit was poured out at Pentecost; and the day the disciples met to break bread, and take up the collection. Sunday is the day they assembled together to break bread in remembrance of the Lord's death until He returned.

Paul had gone to the Jewish Synagogue and preached to the Jews as was his custom when visiting any Gentile city where there was a Jewish Synagogue. Those who believed were eventually separated into a body of believers that included Jew and Gentile. These believers met on the first day of the week, rather than the Jewish Sabbath, which was Saturday. This wasn't easy, as normal business went on, and many may have been expected to work, or maybe needed to work; but this day was special, and was given to the Lord.

This day they were to meet at a brother's house. In the beginning they did not have meeting houses, nor would they have been allowed to have them. As we see them gathering to this brother's house, we see the women dressed plain and simple: no jewelry, costly array, makeup, or fashionable attire. We see their heads veiled with hanging scarfs: no cut, permed, fixed hair. This was not so unusual, as no self respecting women in those days were ever caught without their heads veiled in public--only the loose women did that. These Christian women covered their heads for a spiritual, not just a cultural reason. All the churches of God held the custom that women cover their heads as a part of feminine modesty, which symbolized being in their God given place under authority. It would be a shame for a Christian woman to do spiritual business immodestly without the proper symbol of her place under authority.

The Christian women were not coming to church to show off their new dress, talk about their career, or learn the latest gossip. Instead, they dressed simple, modest, and plain. They were keepers at home, where they worked hard to teach and train their children -- not send them to heathen schools. They kept silent in the church assembly (except for

singing), and if they had a question, they asked their husbands at home -- for he was a spiritual leader, who studied and knew the Bible, not a couch potato watching the TV; or workaholic who had no time for God.

As we enter the house we don't see "Home Interiors" from wall to wall, but simple, practical furnishings. We see Christian brothers greet one another with a holy kiss of charity, and extend the right hand of fellowship to one another. The sisters likewise greet one another in the Lord. They have not come together to be entertained by music or a funny speaker; for they would have been appalled at the thought of "Christian entertainment" in or out of God's assembly. There is no room in a holy God fearing life for the vanities of this world.

Singing (the fruit of our lips) was a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving to God; and also for admonishing one another; but never for the glory of the flesh, or the entertainment of men. They didn't come to get a good laugh; for vain mirth was also unknown to their meetings. This was a special and sacred time to remember Christ as he had asked them to; and exhort one another to continue in the faith, and endure to the end with the glorious expectation of inheriting Christ's Kingdom.

They have come together on the first day of the week to break bread (the Lord's supper), as they did every week. During this sacred and glorious time, they would worship the Lord in psalm, hymn, and spiritual song. All the brothers would be welcome to take part, according to their spiritual gift, in giving a word of doctrine, sharing an exhortation, or suggesting a hymn. All things were done decently and in order, but not in dead formalism with one man running the whole show.

If any spake another language, they were to keep silent unless there was someone who could speak both their language and that of the assembly, and thus interpret. In this case the visitor of another language could share a word also.

The bishop was to oversee and exhort the people. It was his responsibility to see that things were in line with the Word of God, and that the sheep were fed. If you were there, you would rejoice to behold their order and steadfastness in the faith of Christ. You would never hear someone talk about the "preacher's kid" being the brat of the church; for a man couldn't be a bishop, without having his wife and children in order first. A bishop and deacon had to meet all the requirements of Scripture, not just have a degree from some college or give a smooth, entertaining, sermon.

This Sunday there was a special joy in the meeting. No, there was no visiting quartet or special singer. This would have been thought abominable to these believers. You would never see a woman up in front of the church dressed up and fixed up showing off her voice, and distracting from the pure worship of Jesus Christ -- it was only the work of antichrists to set themselves up in God's house to be worshipped instead of worshipping God.

No, this week there was no carnival type campaign to draw carnal men by means of the lust of the flesh. Only false prophets allured through wantonness and the lust of the flesh -- so Peter had told them.

No, this was not super-bowl Sunday, where everyone wondered if their team would win. The games in the stadiums were for heathen idolaters, not followers of Jesus Christ.

This week, the beloved Brother Paul was passing through town, and would preach to them today. He would not have any funny stories, fancy illustrations, or great swelling words of man's wisdom. He had purposed to preach nothing but Christ crucified. For he knew the preaching of the cross is the only thing that really matters. Now, the preaching of the cross, wasn't just the one Jesus died on; but the one we all must die on, if we are to follow Jesus. We must be crucified with Christ; crucified to the world, flesh, and Devil; and given wholly over to God. Paul's speech was not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power.

Paul preached and warned us all with tears that we should not cast off our confidence in Christ Jesus, which hath great recompense of reward; that we should guard against those who wish to change the whole counsel of God, which he had presented; and that we should exhort one another to continue in God's grace. He pressed us earnestly that through trial, and problems with false teachers we must endure in our love for Christ (lest it wax cold), and in our love for each other (lest we be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin). He warned us of the Gnostic heretics who deny Jesus having come in the flesh, and were turning the grace of God into lasciviousness - in teaching our physical performance didn't affect our spiritual condition. These Gnostics taught unconditional eternal security, man's unconditional fate (predestination), and that Jesus' Father wasn't the God of Abraham. They taught that man was so depraved, they couldn't repent; but Paul affirmed that what God had commanded, we were able to do by his grace. It was our choice, and we would be held accountable for it.

Finally, he stressed the exhortation that we have need of patience, that after we have done the will of God, we would receive the promise of eternal life in Christ's Heavenly Kingdom. He affirmed the words of Peter that the way to be secure was not to believe in unconditional eternal security; but to commit the keeping of our souls to God in well doing -- to abide faithful in Christ.

After this they prayed in one accord. The men praying in all earnest with uplifted hands, and all rejoicing for the word of exhortation. Then they talked a great while, and finally had to part to their own homes after breaking bread together.

If Paul hadn't been there, one or more of the other brothers would have preached to the people, as the Spirit led. At the departing, it was obvious the love these people had one to another. You could tell they were grieved to part one from another. Each gave the other a final exhortation of many different sorts: One told his brother to "be not forgetful to entertain strangers, because thereby some had entertained angels unawares". Another told his brother to remember to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, for without this man's religion was not pure and undefiled before God. Another asked his brother to pray for him that a door of utterance would be opened unto him so he could preach Christ to those around him. Another confessed some faults to the brothers to pray with him to be healed. This went on until they had all parted and gone home with hearts rejoicing and yet serious with the great responsibility to be sober and diligent to seek the Lord and be ready for Jesus to come. They also knew that before Jesus would come, there was going to be a great apostasy from the faith, and an antichrist system set up - which happened in the Roman Catholic system. The believers carried a heavy responsibility to defend the true faith against all the heretics of the day.

God forbid that Jesus should come and find them asleep, and then they would forfeit their opportunity to enter in with him to the wedding; or that they should recant in time of persecution and torture -- for all this they needed to be sober and ready.

One brother, during the meeting, had shared some persecution he had been receiving; and was lovingly reminded he must forgive, or would not be forgiven himself; also that he must return good for evil, and love his enemies. To this he admitted he needed prayer to stay faithful.

In this meeting there was not music, but the fruit of the lips of God's people. The early church followed the format of the meetings of the synagogue, where there was little singing, no instrumental music, and much reading and study. There was no regard for any credentials of

man from any Bible College; for there were none. The reliance was on a man's spiritual walk and gifts, not his supposed head knowledge. The only knowledge that was honored, was the true knowledge which produces the fruit of righteousness and holiness in the life of the believer.

I mentioned before that the women kept silent in the service. However, outside the church meeting, the mature Christian ladies taught the younger to love their husbands, and love their children. This was not done in word only, but also in deed as they daily set this example before them. You would never find a woman teaching in the assembly, serving as elder, leading singing, singing specials, or asking questions during the meeting. She could ask her husband, who could later ask the brethren. None of the brethren held "degrees" or were elevated above another in being called "doctor", "master", "rabbi", or the like. They were all brothers filling their proper roles in the body, and Jesus was the only "head" and "Master". When everyone is content to fill their role, and all know how to keep rank, then there is harmony and productivity in the body.

During the meeting, every brother gave forth the offering he had laid by him in store that week as the Lord had prospered him. This was used to take care of the widows within the church which had no younger family to do it; to support missionary work; to help the poor brethren at home or in other churches; and to help support the bishop, so he could give himself continually to ministry work and prayer, like the apostles. Many bishops followed Paul's example, and helped support themselves, because their church was small, or the people were struggling just to make it themselves. There was not a "clergy"- "laity" distinction, as all the brethren were "ministers"; but there were elders/bishops/pastors who were godly men that oversaw the proceedings. They did this more from the power of influence, than of the authority of position - though they did have authority when standing on a biblical principle to make decisions for the body.

Yes, this is a simple picture of the order of the early church. On the Lord's Day, you would not find them at the market buying or trading, plowing their fields, or doing business. No, they didn't observe it as a Jewish Sabbath; but as the Lord's Day, doing his work. You surely wouldn't find the Pastor and "special speaker" going to the local steak house after church. This would have been a disgrace and a shame. The people had crucified their affections and lusts, and were not fashioning themselves according to the former lusts in their ignorance. It is wrong to support a business that keeps people from being able to observe the

Lord's Day in order to feed you. Their money was Jesus' money, and they didn't spend it frivolously -- too many brothers and sisters were in need; and too much of God's work needed to be done to spend their money vainly and frivolously in feasting like the heathen. Often some would even fast so they could afford to help a brother in need.

They were holy, separated people, but not "stuck up". They welcomed the poor man in his rags. They preached to the publican and harlots, as Jesus and the Apostles had taught them, and were always ready to help the repentant. James had told them to never treat a rich man who came to their meeting better than a poor man in rags. Nor did they come to church to show off their riches and fashion. They lived simple and plain in protest to the worldly minded fashion and money hungry society around them.

They labored under adverse conditions, and history shows their success and heroic existence. They were truly hated of all nations, because they testified, like Jesus, that men's deeds were evil, and must be repented of. Many of them died and sealed their preaching with their own blood, just as the Apostles who taught them, and Jesus, their Lord. Their holy lives were a continual prick to consciences around them. This provoked persecution and mocking. They were calling men to reconcile with God on God's terms; and this often ignites hatred and resistance from the rebellious.

IS THIS CHRISTIANITY LOST?

Not at all! Jesus will have a faithful remnant until he returns. There are believers today striving to live by the example of the early churches. God has always had a remnant of faithful followers. You can trace their existence often by the blood of martyrdom; but always by a life of holiness and godliness in submission to Jesus Christ.

These believers are scattered through the world. You won't find them on the "Christian" TV, or radio. You won't read about them in the "top ten" best sellers at the "Christian book store". You will know them by the simple, holy life they are trying to live. Usually the most visible thing is the women's modest dress and veiled head. The men also dress modest, plain, and when doing spiritual business always uncover their heads; but this is not so noticeable.

I'm not saying that all churches with head veils on the women are like first century churches; but if these factors are not there, then you can be sure they are not like first century churches.

God has a remnant today, as he always has. I am a part of a group that strives to live by New Testament example plus nothing, minus nothing. We are not perfect, as they were not either; but are striving for perfection, just as the early churches did. If you are a true follower of Jesus, you must separate from practices and groups that do not follow New Testament example; and walk in all the light God gives you. If your church is willing to change and follow the New Testament example, then stay with it, and help it; but if not, then you must leave. We would invite you to come and help us strive for this goal.

You'll not find many things you find in modern day churches. You won't find "child evangelism" or "child baptism"; but you will find child training by parents who fear God. These parents won't send their children to a public school; but see it as a God given responsibility to bring up their own children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. As stated earlier, you won't find Calvinism, "eternal security", youth activities (family activities instead), or sinful lifestyles tolerated and excused. You won't find anything (we hope and pray) that you wouldn't find in the first century faithful churches. And, by God's grace, you'll find everything you need to grow in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

You may not find a big crowd, as a remnant is never agreeable to the main stream. You won't find the fleshly security of endorsement from the "big names" of the day, as even Jesus didn't receive that; but actually spoke against it. We are to go with him without the camp bearing his reproach, even as he has born our sin and reproach.

But, if you truly want the straight and narrow way, we do have the Word of God, the company of the faithful remnant through the centuries, and the faith once delivered to the saints. Until Jesus comes, let us be watchful, lest he come and find us sleeping!

"And now also the axe is laid unto the root of the trees: every tree therefore which bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire." Luke 3:9

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