

THE REMNANT AND THE MASSES

BY

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THE REMNANT AND THE MASSES
Matt. 22:14

You and I live in a time of constant change. Anyone over sixty years old has seen an almost dizzying array of changes. Lillian Blasi tabulates some of the changes that these "Survivors," as she calls them, have witnessed: They were born before television, before penicillin, before polio shots, frozen foods, Xerox, plastic, contact lenses, and Frisbees. They were before radar, credit cards, split atoms, laser beams and ballpoint pens. She points out "cultural" changes: They got married first then lived together, and she asks "How quaint can you be?" In their time, closets were for clothes, not for "coming out of." Bunnies were small rabbits and rabbits were not Volkswagons. Designer Jeans were scheming girls named Jean or Jeanne, and having a meaningful relationship meant getting along well with our cousins. She notes changes in vocabulary: In their day, cigarette smoking was fashionable, Grass was mowed, Coke was a cold drink and Pot was something you cooked in. Rock Music was a Grandma's lullaby and Aids were helpers in the principal's office.

Among all these changes in so many different areas of life, it would be surprising indeed if the area of religion had not been affected. It has. We have seen church names proliferate, church organization completely recast, worship revolutionized, and "plans of salvation" offered in an amazing variety. These changes prompt a few reflections on the very nature of the word "change." In the long list of dictionary meanings of this word, there is no reference to whether change is good or bad. The word is neutral. Whether "change" is good or bad depends entirely on the context in which it appears. All of us know from experience, however, that "change" is not always and necessarily good; it can be, and often is, bad. One can change something good for something quite bad. On the other hand, many of the changes that we have witnessed have been for good.

The desire for change, so prevalent in the world about us, has spilled over into the church. From many quarters we are hearing calls for "change." There are those who are telling us that if the church does not accommodate itself more to our age, if it does not adapt to our present culture, it may no longer be around by the end of the century. If we don't give up some of

our distinctive ideas and practices, we are going to alienate the religious people around us and they will ignore us. We are hearing calls to give up our plea for the unity of the Lord's people set forth in the New Testament. Some call for a change in the worship we offer the Lord, others want us to deemphasize the importance of baptism because our present emphasis does too much to separate us from the religious groups around us, still others want instrumental music, choirs, and solos to be used along with congregational singing, and yet others want to see women assume an active role in the various aspects of public worship.

In all of these calls for "change" there is to be seen a mistaken notion of the very nature of the church and of our relationship to the Head of the church. May I suggest in the first place that men in every age have ignored the truth of God along with those who try to follow it and in the second place that you and I need have no fear that the church will cease to exist by the end of the century if "we do not make some changes." The church, our Lord's kingdom, will be here until the end of time. When our Lord comes, He will deliver it up to the Father. (1 Cor. 15:23,24)

The question that ought to concern us most is clearly this one: "Are we striving to be the church of the Lord?" "Will we be content to be His church, or, in our desire for change, will we move so far away from the Lord that He will no longer recognize us?" "Changing the church" is not our prerogative. While our Lord said, "Fear not, little flock; for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." (Luke 12:32), at no point has He given up his place as "Head" of the church. By no stretch of the imagination has He given the members of His body authority to make such changes as suit them. He still reigns over His kingdom, and the mark of citizenship continues to be submission to His will.

Restoration Movement

Many of these calls for "change" grow out of a misapprehension of what we have been pleased to call "The Restoration Movement." The idea of "restoration" is a valid one. To restore anything of value to its original state is a worthwhile goal, and there have always been those who have worked diligently to restore the ancient order. The prerequisite in all such efforts, however, is to restore the Word of God to its proper place in the hearts of men. Christ teaches people that if they will hear His word and obey it from the heart, they will be His church - in the first century, in the twentieth, or in any century in between.

It is highly questionable, in fact quite doubtful, that such great and good men as Alexander Campbell, Barton W. Stone, David Lipscomb, and others ever entertained the thought of beginning

a "Movement." They determined to go to the word of God, to learn what He has taught, to obey it, and to encourage as many as they could to follow the same course. It remained for those who followed them, those who saw the fruits of their labors, to label the results a "Movement." The emphasis upon the "Movement," however, has its dangers. When they concentrate their attention upon the "Movement," men invariably shift their focus and emphasis from the divine to the human, from God to man, and the "Movement" becomes "Our" Movement, and, with the passage of time, "Our" Tradition.

Products of a Tradition

Many of those who are calling for change in the church think of themselves as the products of "Our Movement," "Our Fellowship," "Our Tradition." One writes, "we must recognize that we ourselves stand in a human tradition and that we are heirs of a particular way of reading the Bible." This statement serves as an illustration of what happens when we allow our focus to shift from God to man. Since we are dealing with "Our" Movement, and since "Our" Movement is not too different from other movements, we can make any changes we want to make, just as they do. We will simply change our way of reading the Bible, and we can do anything we want to do. This is nothing new. Men have been following this course for centuries, and it has always led them away from God.

Our Roots

The people of the Lord do not have their roots in Alexander Campbell, Barton W. Stone, David Lipscomb, or any other man. They are "rooted and builded up" in Christ. (Col. 2:7) This is true of those who, in any age or in any part of the world, hear and obey the word of God. There are faithful Christians in various parts of the world who have never heard of Campbell or Stone or Lipscomb. They would have great difficulty understanding what is meant by "The Restoration Movement." They have gone to the word of God, learned His will for their lives, and obeyed it.

Recently while talking with a veteran gospel preacher who has served in South Africa for more than twenty-five years, I asked him how many times in the course of his preaching and teaching he had mentioned the names Alexander Campbell, Barton W. Stone, David Lipscomb or had made reference to The Restoration Movement. His reply was prompt. "Not once," he said; "People there know nothing about them." Here are people who have heard the gospel of Christ, believed it, obeyed it, and, according to the promise of our Lord, been added to His church, all without ever hearing of Campbell, Stone, Lipscomb, or any others of the host of their earnest fellow workers who wanted simply to be the church of our Lord.

We are deeply grateful for the faith and work of such men and for the help they have given us in our search for the truth. At the same time, to use some of the language of the Apostle Paul, we recognize that they are men, and we are led to ask, What is Alexander Campbell, and what is Barton W. Stone? Ministers through whom ye believed; and each as the Lord gave to him. Campbell planted, Stone watered; but God gave the increase. Now note the important thought: *So then neither is he that planteth anything, neither he that watereth; but God that giveth the increase.* Now he that planteth and he that watereth are one: but each shall receive his own reward according to his own labor. (1 Cor. 3:6-8)

The Remnant and the Masses

The advocates of "change" may earnestly desire to reach more people, to appeal to the masses with the gospel of Christ. The desire to reach more people is certainly praiseworthy, and the desire for "change" may well be prompted by the sincerest of motives. They may want only to make "Our Fellowship," "Our Movement," "Our Tradition" more appealing, more attractive, thus drawing more people to "Our Movement." Their appeal, however, springs from a misconception of the church and is flawed at the very outset. "Our Movement" becomes the focus of their thoughts and efforts, not Christ. Ignoring the word of our Lord, they follow their own wisdom while claiming to advance His cause.

Before directing our appeal to the masses by accommodating our message to their desires, it would be well to consider the distinction that existed in Bible times between the "Remnant" and the "Masses," a distinction that exists at the present day, one that will always exist. This distinction is pointed out by Curtis Dickinson, in his publication, *The Witness*.¹ I am indebted to him for our title and for some of the ideas presented here. He quotes Albert Jay Nock, *Free Speech and Plain Language*: "The mass-man is one who has neither the force of intellect to apprehend the principles issuing in what we know as the human life, nor the force of character to adhere to those principles steadily and strictly as laws of conduct; and because such people make up the great, the overwhelming majority of mankind, they are called collectively the masses... The Remnant are those who by force of intellect are able to apprehend these principles, and by force of character are able, at least measurably, to cleave to them."

The church which sets out to appeal to the masses must do so by accomodating its message to the popular mind This is the reason, Dickinson says, "you may hear religious words set to the tempo of uncivilized rhythm called 'rock' and find the meaningful hymns being omitted in favor of repeating the same phrase over and over to a childish tune. Whatever appeals to the mass-mind is

used as bait, from entertainers of show business to the stars of the sports industry. The requirements for discipleship are trimmed to attract the greatest number with the least change from carnal to spiritual aspirations. The result is that, to use Nock's words, "the prophetic message is so heavily adulterated with trivialities, in every instance, that its effect on the masses is merely to harden them in their sins. Meanwhile the Remnant turn their backs on the prophet...."

We need to consider this approach in the light of the Biblical emphasis upon the distinction between the "Remnant" and the "Masses". Dickinson points out that in the days of Noah the masses, in their wickedness and violence, had everything going their way. It is written:

And Jehovah saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And it repented Jehovah that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him at his heart. And Jehovah said, I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the ground; both man, and beast, and creeping things, and birds of the heavens; for it repenteth me that I have made them. But Noah found favor in the eyes of Jehovah. (Gen. 6:5-8)

God directed his message to Noah, a "righteous man, and perfect in his generations: Noah walked with God." (Gen. 6:9) Surely here was a man who by force of intellect was able to apprehend the principles issuing in human life and who by force of character was able measurably to cleave to them. The Bible tells us that Noah by faith, "being warned of God concerning things not seen as yet, moved with godly fear, prepared an ark to the saving of his house...." (Heb. 11:7) This man served as a "preacher of righteousness" while the ark was being prepared, and God "preserved Noah with seven others... when he brought a flood upon the world of the ungodly...." (2 Pet 2:5) The masses were destroyed; the remnant, a total of eight souls, were saved.

At the Tower of Babel the masses united in a common purpose. They reasoned that if they were one in aim, nothing could stop them, even if their goal was wrong. They mistakenly supposed that their unity of purpose would be the guarantee of their success. What need did they have of God? They would build a tower that would reach to the heavens and thus make a name for themselves. The One they thought they could do without, the One who wasn't going to tell them what to do, destroyed their rebellion by confusing their language.

We stand today, seemingly, upon the brink of another mar-

velous technological breakthrough that promises to restore man's ability to overcome the barrier of diverse languages. Work is going forward on the development of a megaphone that will enable a person to speak into one end in English and to have his message come out at the other end in whatever language he chooses -- instantaneous translation. We do know that even now one idea, beginning on one side of the world can sweep around the earth and impact the billions on it in a very short time. If that capability could be further enhanced by a device that would make possible instantaneous translation, man would once again possess the ability to unite in a common purpose. If that purpose could be to acquaint men with the truths of God, how wonderful it would be! But if the purpose were to demonstrate to the world that man has no need of God, we would be right back where men were in the days of the Tower of Babel. The masses had their own plans and those plans did not include a recognition of God. Will that same situation exist today?

Elijah lamented, "I have been very jealous for Jehovah, the God of hosts; for the children of Israel have forsaken thy covenant, thrown down thine altars, and slain thy prophets with the sword: and I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life, to take it away." The Lord told him, "Yet will I leave me seven thousand in Israel, all the knees which have not bowed unto Baal, and every mouth which hath not kissed him." (1 Kings 19:10, 18) While the masses followed Baal, the remnant remained loyal to God.

Sometimes we forget a very obvious truth of the Scriptures: Jesus did not appeal to the masses. It is true that when they saw His signs and wonders, they thronged him -- would have made him King. But when they began to understand what He really wanted of them, many deserted Him. The number was so great on one occasion that the Lord asked His disciples, "Would ye also go away?" (John 6:60-69) The teaching of the Bible is that only a remnant will be saved. The Bible is clear about that. Over and over it is pointed out that of a certain group -- sometimes a tribe, sometimes the entire people of God -- only a remnant was spared. Reference is made to the "remnant", and to the concept that word suggests, again and again. Our Lord has said, "Not everyone that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father who is in heaven." (Matt. 7:21) Again, "Enter ye in by the narrow gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many are they that enter in thereby. For narrow is the gate, and straitened the way, that leadeth unto life, and few are they that find it." (Matt. 7:13,14) And once more: "For many are called, but few chosen." (Matt. 22:14) The idea of the salvation of a remnant is clearly taught in the word of God.

These considerations should help us remember that the "mass-

es" have their own agenda. They know what they want, and they mean to have it. They love this world and the things of this world, their priorities are set, and they are not about to give them up for the promise of something better after this life is over. Any appeal to the masses is to those who, to use Dickin-son's words, "are brainwashed by propaganda, saturated with trivia and rendered incapable of discipline or true repentance. The method is to make the message appealing to those who follow the crowd, who stay in style, who know the 'in thing' and who are 'with it'."

The sad fact is the world is filled with preachers who will trim the message to suit them. Such preachers will remove whatever is offensive. Over the years I have heard many of the country's most popular preachers who speak to multitudes of people. In not one instance have I ever heard one of them tell his listeners what Jesus said for them to do to be saved. The message has been trimmed. It has been made to fit the modern mind.

Jesus' method is stated clearly: "And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto myself. But this he said, signifying by what manner of death he should die." (Jno.12:32,33) Jesus draws all men unto himself, not by being lifted up by honor and praise among the masses, but by being lifted up on the cross, the most shameful spectacle the world knew at the time. This suggests that the church of our Lord is not the sweetheart of the modern civic club, but the bride of Christ. "Its aim is not the winning of a popularity contest, but the approval of God." Therefore, the message of the gospel "must always be aimed at those individuals in the world who have the heart and the mind to grasp the unique purpose of God as revealed through His Son, Jesus."

Our Lord Appeals to the Honest and Good Heart

Does this mean the gospel is not for everybody? Let us notice what Jesus said: "He that is of God heareth the words of God: for this cause ye hear them not, because ye are not of God." (John 8:47) Our Lord makes His appeal to the "honest and good heart" wherever that heart may be found in the world. He appealed to people in all stations of life -- to Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews; to the Samaritan woman, a sinner, but evidently an exceptional woman; to the Centurion, whose faith the Lord commended. These, and others like them, comprise the "good ground" of the Lord's parable of the sower. We call it "The Parable of the Sower"; it might more properly be called "The Parable of the Soils," because the seed sown is not received by every kind of soil. Only the fertile soil -- the mind and heart willing to receive the word of Christ -- the heart that hungers and thirsts after righteousness -- is proper ground for the seed.

The seed does not accommodate itself to the soil.

The Word of God, the seed, is to be preached. It does not need to be adjusted or accommodated to the mass mind. The truth is to be preached everywhere, to everyone, so that the fertile soil -- the honest and good heart -- may be able to perceive that it is the unique message of Christ. When that happens, such a heart will receive the implanted word, will hunger and thirst after it until through the "obedience of faith" it brings forth a new creation, not fashioned after this world, but transformed by the renewing of the mind. There are those who will hear the words of God because they are of God -- they constitute the honest and good heart. The "change" they desire takes place in their own hearts and lives as they strive daily for a closer walk with their Lord.

Our message must be aimed, not at the masses, but preached among the masses and aimed at the potential Christian among them who is looking for directions from God. As long as we think that somehow we can accommodate the message of the gospel to the masses of this world we are going to be disappointed. But if we can see the gospel as the message of God that must be preached to everyone in order that those who will may hear and obey, we can rejoice over the conversion of men and women wherever they may be around the world.

Some of the few times that I have gone fishing were with brother Bee Holt, of Elkmont, Alabama. Brother Holt knew the best places on the river, and he could be ready at a moment's notice. He would sit in the rear of the boat, stirring a paddle slowly and very quietly in the water with his right hand to keep the boat moving. When we came to a huge tree with gnarled roots exposed both above and below the water, he would say, "This is a lovely place", and we would begin to catch fish. But brother Bee was always on the move, and I learned the very important lesson that fishermen are in reality "hunters." Fishers of men are hunters of men. We preach the gospel to all men, and as we do so we are hunting for that soul here and that soul there who will respond to the message of Christ.

Such a hunter -- such a messenger -- is not unduly concerned about what his audience wants to hear. He is vitally concerned about one thing -- that he tells the truth, that he preaches the Word of God. This is what counts. He will endeavor to be worthy of the high calling that is his. He will strive to keep himself from being an obstacle to the reception of the truth. But his primary concern is not to satisfy an audience with what it wants to hear. His concern is to tell the truth of God in order that men may know it. He will declare the gospel "that Christ died for

our sins according to the scriptures; and that he was buried; and that he hath been raised on the third day according to the scriptures...." (1 Cor. 15:3,4) He will declare the Lord's call to faith, repentance, confession, baptism, and a life of faithful, obedient service. He will stress the necessity of learning and understanding the word of the Lord and of submitting to His will. Generally that message "will fall on deaf ears, and cannot be expected to evoke praise from any who are in the religious mainstream. But Christ's sheep, the remnant, will hear." Without fanfare and notoriety for the messenger, the truth will be believed, the seed will grow and produce fruit unto eternal life, for our Lord has said, "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me." (John 10:27)

References:

¹ Curtis Dickinson, Ed., *The Witness*, "The Remnant and the Masses," Vol. XXXII, No. 8, published monthly, 3135 Forney Lane, El Paso, TX 79935-1624.

² Albert J. Nock, *Free Speech and Plain Language*, William Morrow & Co., (1870-1945)

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