

The Bride In A Burka

It seems that standing in line at the Post Office is my social life these days. There I see a cross-section of our society. Among these I sometimes see a late-comer to our American scene, a Arabic Muslim woman in a burka. Well, I presume it is such a person. It could be a man in disguise! All that is visible are her hands and a glimpse of her eyes through the narrow slit in the burka enabling her to see. She is as a non-person concealed in black. After standing in line every day for weeks, if she were to come one day in street clothing, it is doubtful that anyone would recognize her.

The bride of Christ has been concealed in a burka, not by the will of God but by the will of man. The church stands in the market place of our society shrouded in mystery because she is hidden under the traditions of centuries, the misdirection of clerics and their creeds, cultural encrustation, and interpretations expounded as law. Can she be detected and identified under the black veil of scores of divisions, sub-divisions, and divisions of sub-divisions? If one of the seven angels were to speak today, saying, *“Come, I will show you the Bride, the wife of the Lamb”* (Rev. 21:9), would we even recognize her among us?

In my recent lessons concerning the church, the body, and the purpose of assemblies, I have made an effort in my limited understanding to let you see the church in street clothing, with the veil lifted, not to her shame, but to reveal her simple beauty and real humanity. A good number of you have responded enthusiastically but I am not so foolish as to think the majority who might have read the essays found anything in them to praise.

The Muslim religion offers us an interesting example of effort to freeze a culture. Some try to retain dress styles and the Arabic culture of the time of the founding of their religion. They detest Western, modern culture, considering it decadent. In some countries, their authoritarian religious laws are made the law of the land. No one is permitted to criticize their religion so as to introduce change. In general, the status of women has been demeaning like that of the woman hidden from the eyes of men other than her husband by a burka. While Islam proclaims a message of peace and love, some adherents can be most vicious and merciless toward violators and other religions, and their various sects wage war against each other.

In the Christian religion, some think to freeze the church in a supposed pattern of its early years. The problem is that the “pattern” may only be as they remembered the church in their childhood. There is resistance to any change. For centuries, the Bible was a forbidden book for the laity. Though churches claim to promote peace, love, and unity, there continues to be divisions, competition, and rejection among them. Dissenters and reformers have suffered loss of freedom and life. Destructive wars have been incited by sectarian zeal. Popes have ruled kings. Authoritarian claims by sects of Christianity and

Islam have demanded adherence by force. Cultic discipline is a burka concealing her true nature. The “underbellies” of both religions are unsightly and repulsive.

We are allowed to see and admire the beauty of the object of God’s grace before it was obscured. By imputed righteousness, God has presented the Bride in her beauty because “.. *Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish*” (Eph. 5:23-27). Let us look at some pictures of her before our imposed burkas.

The church is the saved people, those who accept the grace of God through faith in Christ. On Pentecost the good news of God’s provision through Christ was announced. About 3000 people were convicted in heart as they believed the gospel. In penitence, they accepted God’s terms by submitting to baptism for forgiveness of their sins. The Lord added together those being saved. He did not add them to an organization. The saved were the church. The very process of gaining forgiveness made them the church.

In rejection of the above, many sincere believers drape the first burka over the bride by declaring that sinners are saved the moment they believe, leaving repentance and baptism out. By that, they deny that the saved comprise the church, the “ekklesia,” those called out into God’s assembly in Christ, for that assembly / congregation is entered through baptism (See Acts 2; 1 Cor. 12:13).

Further, Paul affirms that Christ is head and savior of the church which is identified as his body. “*For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior*” (Eph. 5:23). He also identifies the means of establishing that relationship in Christ and his body/church as submission to baptism (Gal. 3:27; Rom. 6:3-4). Is one saved who is not in that forgiven group -- his church, his body -- of which he is the Savior? If baptism is not in recognition and acceptance of that relationship, then it only becomes the door into an organization. And men contend for such, but the saved are not an organization, either universally, denominationally, or congregationally. Isn’t it time for us to remove this burka to reveal the simple beauty of the Bride? All to whom Christ’s grace imputes righteousness are the Bride.

Christ is High Priest mediating between man and God. All disciples approach God in relationship, worship, and service on equal terms as “*a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ*” (1 Peter 2:4-5, 9). There is no clergy and laity, no hierarchy or power structure. Just brothers. But, in time, the frock of a holy order in the Roman church became a burka to conceal that treasured relationship. The authoritative hierarchy developed so that, when they speak as the church, God is thought to have spoken. Martin Luther sought to tear that garment from the church, only to replace it with the pastor who served much the same capacity. As other reform groups began, they retained the role of the pastor with some alterations to his role and authority, but still elevating the “pulpit” above the lay members. In Protestantism, he has been

ordained and licensed as an official spokesman for the church. In varying degrees in different churches, the frock of the clergy is the burka of the Bride hiding and supplanting mutual ministry.

The greatest preacher of all time made his own living as a tent-maker. He received some support as an evangelist, and declared that right (1 Cor.9:1-14) but did not exercise it among the Corinthians in his 18-month stay with them. He never filled the capacity of a professional pastor, a hired servant and surrogate elder of a congregation. It was the function of elders/pastors/shepherds to feed the flock. Elders who gave themselves fully to this work were to be supported, as Paul taught, “*Let elders who rule well (defined ‘stand before, lead, attend to’) be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching; for the scripture says ‘You shall not muzzle an ox when it is treading out the grain,’ and, ‘The laborer deserves his wages’*” (1 Tim. 5:17-18). Thus the church was fed by mutual ministry rather than by imported professionals.

The Jerusalem church was not an organization, yet as a matter of expediency, the disciples appointed seven men to a certain function (Acts 6:1-6). Congregations were autonomous. Other than for the twelve apostles, no necessary authoritative offices are implied in the Scriptures though the disciples could designate tasks for expediting. Probably 15 years passed before elders were appointed, the first being mentioned in Acts 14:23. The description of pastors were sent to Timothy and Titus in about 65 or 66 AD.

Until the emperor, Constantine, favored the church in 325 and began to construct buildings for it at government expense, there is no record of the church owning property. The early converts did not segregate from other Jews in separate buildings with a “church” sign over the door. They met in homes and in the temple. In Damascus they were meeting in the synagogues, and James intimates the same to be true in Jerusalem (Acts 9:1-2; 15:21). The “people movement” has been diverted into a burdensome construction movement. Becoming dependent upon buildings and judging the church by the building, we let it become a burka concealing its real identity.

With the development of a priesthood came the concept of “going to church” in order to worship through rituals conducted by, and mediated through, the priest who acted as a vicar (substitute) of Christ. The “sacraments” through which grace was supposedly received were administered by the priest. The Mass became a vertical upreach with little emphasis on a horizontal, mutual outreach. Worship became a segmented part of life performed in a building through rituals conducted by vicars of Christ rather than being a full-life living sacrifice. Instead of the worshipper presenting himself as a living offering, the worshipper participated in a bloodless sacrifice of Christ in each Mass.

Though we have rejected the specific concepts mentioned above, can you not see that we have inherited many adaptations of them. In my recent series on “Why Assemble,” I have shown that our purpose of assembling is for edification in mutual ministry. I shall not cover all that again here, but it is appropriate to recall some points. In unscriptural terms, we talk about going to church, going to worship, gathering in the house of God,

presenting ourselves to God, and other such expressions, but never speak of assembling for edification. There through ritualistic exercises we think to receive grace mediated through a system which cannot be supplied at home or elsewhere. We think to please God by a concert of praise with vertical rather than horizontal focus. We have come to think of rituals to be performed in legal correctness so as to be pleasing to God. The exercises in assemblies become our sacrifice rather than we ourselves being total, living sacrifices. There is effort to distinguish between the holy and the secular in our lives. Can you not agree that we have permitted the frock of the clergy to drape the Bride of Christ as a burka concealing the purpose of assemblies? Not just concealing, but deceiving!

The main glimpses we have of early congregational activity are of the churches in Jerusalem and Corinth. In Jerusalem they were happy and serving the needs of one another. In Corinth they were becoming selfish and disruptive so that mutual upbuilding was being defeated. Paul sought to correct that. Their gatherings evidently centered in a meal together during which the bread and wine were served in memory of Christ's death for them. They sang, prayed, and taught. These were happy, supportive gatherings in which they reached out to one another. Their lack of formality and ritualism easily allowed self-centered persons to become offensive. This lack of consideration was the focus of Paul's corrective rebuke. He did not condemn their format.

Since no specific format for assemblies was laid out in Scriptures, evidently, God intends for us to have enough good judgment to determine what is uplifting for those who make up the assemblies. If shoes are what is needed, don't buy a new hat.

Of the many people within walking distance of your congregation, how many attend? The fact that the people in your group drive from various communities speaks loudly -- that the group is hung up on doctrinal scruples and that it is not filling the needs of people. OK, I think I know what some of you are thinking, but please consider this seriously before tossing it and me out.

In her street clothing the Bride is the forgiven people whose covering is a robe made white by the imputed righteousness of Christ. That is her primary and unchanging mark of identity, and her identifying character is demonstrated by love more than by rituals. Her methods of outreach to fill both the physical and spiritual needs of both believers and unbelievers may adapt with culture as is expedient. She is in the market-place rather than cloistered in earthly sanctuaries. In a burka she does not serve well in Nordstrom's or as a pediatrician. Without a burka, she may look like you.

(Cecil Hook; October 2003) []

