

PREACHER WANTED: About 35 persons have formed a grace-oriented congregation in a nice, larger town in the Texas Panhandle designating it simply as the “Body of Christ.” They wish to be no longer inhibited by our inherited traditions. They feel the need of the leadership of a preacher who is innovative, progressive, and open-minded. They would be able to supplement the income of an employed person or one with partial support. For more information about it, call 1-806-274-9209.

FR 231

GIVING: To Church or Persons?

This fits well with what I wrote about last week. When it was time to take the regular collection where I visited last Sunday, a good brother announced, “At this time we give back to the Lord a portion of that with which he has blessed us.” I have heard that or a similar expression used in announcements or prayers hundreds, maybe thousands, of times. It is a part of our ritual.

We are not dealing with some mortal sin here, but with a misguided concept of what is “our money and the Lord’s money” as we discussed last week.

I have never heard a person explain that he gave back to the Lord a portion of what he was blessed with by giving his son money for plane fare, tuition, books, and all sorts of supplies needed to enroll him in the university. Nor have I heard anyone say they gave several hundred dollars back to the Lord last week in paying the rent and utilities of a young mother whose husband deserted her and their two children. Neither have I heard a man tell how his wife had a health problem not covered by insurance so that he had to give a large portion back to the Lord to pay for it. That would be using, not giving back, the Lord’s money.

I know I am being tediously repetitious. You understand that both we and all we have belongs to God. But when will we come to really believe it, put it into practice, and incorporate it into our speech? Each of us has been schooled since childhood that what we earn or acquire is ours through the blessing of God, but only that “portion” which we give to the Lord is his.

From childhood, I am presuming, most of us have been taught that “giving” is what we do in worship when making a contribution to sustain an organized system known as the church. This bit of truth may meet with disbelief: There is no instruction or example for continuing, regular collections to be made by all congregations through the centuries. In our most used text (1 Cor. 16) concerning giving, Paul instructed the Corinthians to store up money for a single, one-time collection to be taken to the poor saints in Judea. It is wise to note that he did not write, “Now concerning the contribution for the saints; as I directed the churches of Galatia, so you and all other churches in generations to come also are to do.” But that is the way I was taught to understand it. “Lay by in store for the poor in Judea” has been changed to “collect and spend to sustain an organization.”

Jesus is never identified in our community as a destitute stranger, thirsty, hungry, and shivering from lack of clothes. He is never sick and lonely nor forgotten in the county jail. However countless of his “brethren” are in those circumstances. Jesus identifies

with them so that, when we minister to their needs, he counts it as ministering to him (Read Matt. 25:31-46). In that manner we worship/serve/glorify him much more obviously than by singing the newest popular praise song in the assembly.

Not only is our ministry focused on our fellowmen, but our “worship service” (a non-scriptural term) is for the benefit of one another. Our assemblies are intended to be more horizontal than vertical in outreach. “*When you come together .. Let all things be done for edification*” (1 Cor. 14:26). God has no esteem problem so that he needs thirty minutes of praise each week. He needs no money – nothing we can supply. But we creatures have various needs. We assemble to encourage and upbuild each other. We teach the Scriptures to persons, we teach and encourage one another in song, we pray for one another, we give money to help the needs of others and for spreading the message to others, and we proclaim Jesus’ death to one another in communion. These activities should honor God but they are done for the benefit of one another.

These activities are a part of our life of service as priests rather than as rituals of an organized system of religion. Each disciple is a holy priest giving himself/herself in full-time worship as a continuous sacrifice. God’s gifts, aptitudes, and opportunities are given to individuals rather than to an organization. That is “spiritual worship,” for Paul urged disciples “*to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship*” (Rom. 12:1).

Jesus quoted, “*You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve*” (Matt. 4:10). That sentence is a Hebrew parallelism where the second clause expresses the thought of the first in different words or enriched meaning. In it he is indicating that worship is expressed in service

In earlier years I was taught, and also taught, that we should do our good works “in the name of the church” rather than individually “so God will receive the glory” instead of our receiving it. And when we spoke of the church, we intended it to mean the particular segment of the Church of Christ of which we were a part. So our good works were more a promotion of a sect or a denomination and less a glorification of God who is not glorified by promotion of divisions.

Jesus was addressing individuals, not institutions, organizations, or systems, when he taught “*You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hid. Nor do men light a lamp and put it under a bushel, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven*” (Matt. 5:14-16).

Expect more next week. []

(Cecil Hook; September 2004)

Talkin’ Texas: The first word spoken from the moon, July 20, 1969, was “Houston.”