

The Ideal and The Real

The earlier years of television thrived on Western shows like "Wagon Train." Western movies drew people to the theaters. In those shows the American Indian was portrayed as savage, unreasoning, dirty, and fierce and intent on killing all the poor white settlers who seemingly had a right to the frontier land. But then things changed that brought an end to the popularity to such shows. Things were reversed. The last Western shows we saw portrayed the white man as the dirty, greedy, unscrupulous, and murderous villains and the Indians were clean, peaceable, and innocent victims.

In the meantime we have had the Indian culture idealized by portraying their supposed idyllic life in harmony with nature and at peace with "mother earth" and one another. They were doing so well until the white man invaded their country and upset the balance that they had achieved. It is contended that the white man had no right to try to change their culture and religion.

Yes, we can, in retrospect, see many injustices against the Indians (Native Pre-Americans. All of us who were born here are native Americans.) But how idyllic was their life before the Europeans came? They lived in small wigwams or hogans with a fire pit in the middle and no furniture. A fire had to be maintained for they had no matches. They had no metal ax or saw with which to cut wood. The strong smell of smoke would soon permeate both the wigwam and the people and their clothing. Any bathing would be in a cold stream or small clay pot with no soap, no wash cloth, no mirror, no change of clothing, no privacy. How would a baby be diapered? Have you tried cooking in a clay pot over a camp fire? Little or no salt, no baking powder, no oil, no spoon, no knife, no metal fish hook, no spade, no hoe, no plow -- nothing metal. They had no horses, no cows for milk, butter or cheese, no chickens, no eggs, no domestic animals. How would you slaughter and butcher an animal with implements only of wood, bone, or stone? How would you keep meat in warm weather? Their diet was mostly meat. Openings allowing light in a wigwam also let in cold air and allowed flies, mosquitoes, and other insects access also. The only deterrent to insects was smoke. Remedies for disease were more dependent upon magic than science. Bad vision? Sorry! Need dental work? Too bad! Got lice? Good luck! We can be sure that their life expectancy was very short. With no written language, history and learning were anecdotal and traditional. Strong tribal loyalty gave grounds for tribal wars, causing them to live in close communities and to use terrain for protection.

Do our citizens of Indian heritage really want to restore such an idyllic life and culture? I think not! My Cherokee blood does not draw me in that direction. Who would want to try even a month of life like that? Did the encroaching Europeans improve their way of life? Absolutely! The concept of restoration always has an appeal because it visualizes a former ideal situation rather than facing what was real. There are always those who appeal to "return to the good old days" which never existed. Solomon advised, "*Say not, 'Why were the former days better than these?' For it is not from wisdom that you ask this*" (Ecc. 7:10).

I am using this depiction of the North American Indian as an illustration of the illusion many of us have labored under in efforts to restore the church. We begin with the thought that there was an ideal church in the beginning and that we have deviated from it. I inherited the belief that it fell away into extinction in the Dark Ages So there was a call to go back to the “original pattern” of organized Christianity and restore it in our time.

In my early ministry I had a discourse which I thought was rather good, so I used it several times when visiting other congregations. It was about “Jerusalem: The Model Church.” It was only to be expected that the first church with its apostolic oversight would be the model, the ideal, the pattern for all time. In my lesson I selected some of the favorable aspects of the church in Jerusalem as models, even including our “five acts of worship” which we had crafted.

So far, so good -- well, maybe. Some points this bright boy did not mention! He might claim moral honesty, but what about intellectual honesty? Are resident apostles a part of the pattern? Evidently, the elders in Jerusalem were traditional Jewish elders who were converted and continued to be recognized as elders in their new association even though they were novices in the faith. Was that to be a permanent arrangement? Their appointed servants (deacons) did not just serve tables; some preached. They had daily gatherings in the Temple and in their homes, “breaking bread” in their homes. Those comprising the church shared their goods having all things common. There was tension between Judean Jews and Hellenistic Jews. The congregation was exclusively Jewish. The church seems to have been composed of house groups with only one group of elders for the entire city. They did not set an example of congregational independence for the apostles and elders issued a decisive letter to Gentile congregations freeing them from the obligation of circumcision. The Jerusalem church continued to practice circumcision and to keep the traditions of Moses throughout the “last days” for it was a transitional time of overlapping of the earthly and spiritual kingdoms. That was no model for the church today. Supernatural gifts were exercised among them; two persons were even stricken dead in the assembly with apostolic approval. All collections were for aid to the poor. There is no indication that they “laid by in store each first day of the week” or paid religious professionals or purchased real estate. They did not have Sunday school for Bible study. They had no individual Bible study at home, either, for they had no Bibles. Most disciples could not have read one if they had copies. They did not call themselves “Christians”!!! The church had no name! Jesus scattered that church by persecution and then finally dispersed it in the events culminating in AD 70.

I/we took out of context and misapplied God’s instruction that Moses “*See that you make everything according to the pattern*” (Heb. 8:5) and applied it to “the pattern of the church.” However, God was telling men how to build a literal tent/tabernacle, but man does not build the perfect tent/church. God does that (Heb. 9:11).. We convinced ourselves that we were copying a real model but, since that was illusionary, we picked points we liked. Now that we recognize the folly of trying to have a congregation like the one in Jerusalem, which congregation would we choose as a model? How many perfect ones do we read about in the epistles or among the seven churches of Asia? There were none set forth as a model or pattern!

A big part of the problem has been a failure to understand what the church really is, and those erroneous concepts are still prevalent. The church is not a properly organized and correctly functioning religious organization. The church is the saved people. In Acts 2 the gospel message was preached and salvation was offered. Those who were baptized for the remission of their sins became the saved people, the body of Christ, those called out into God's assembly (Acts 2:37; 1 Cor.12:13; Eph. 5:24). Those believers "*devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers*" (Acts 2:42). That was individual activity, not the functioning of an organization. They joined nothing. "*And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved*" (v. 47). The Lord did not organize a church and then make the saved members of it. The Bible does not speak of members of the church! The word "church" is not used until Acts 5:11 and it should not even be in the Scriptures. By the very process of saving them, the Lord added the ones he saved into his universal assembly, his congregation. Where is "the pattern"? Restoring or conforming to a pattern was no part of being saved or counted in God's congregation. That is still true.

Their salvation was not tied to, or dependent upon, elders, deacons, professionals, assemblies, formulas of worship, official names, or any other external element. Neither need we try to "restore" those things in order to save our souls. Our salvation depends upon an individual relationship, dedication, and service. Individuals may and should meet and work with others but others have no rule over them. The individual may withdraw himself from any group as he chooses. He may create, or associate with, another group as he chooses. He is free in Christ -- free from men in order to be a slave of Christ.

We may work and worship corporately with others for mutual edification and service. In such associations loving and strengthening relationships develop. Also, as with most all human associations, conflicts develop. Problem-free associations seem impossible to maintain. The epistles were written primarily dealing with such problems among disciples. In view of that, there is constant need of reformation, but this is on an individual and local level rather than seeking either to restore or reform a universal system of organized religion. There has never been a realistic situation that is our model to restore.

Is the church perfect? Oh, yes! But not by man's restorative efforts. It is by his grace through which he accounts the individuals in his congregation as perfect. Hear Paul again: "*Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of the 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. 5:25-28). That identifies both the ideal and the real. As long as there is one saved person on earth, it exists and does not need restoration.

(Cecil Hook; February 2003) []

