

BIG OAKS AND LITTLE ACORNS

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Matt. 16:13-18

As little as ten years ago, the Foreign Secretary of the Dominion of Damnation was predicting the imminent demise of the Christian church. Of course that was nothing new. Since its beginning, twenty centuries ago, satan's earthly allies have been spreading the rumor that,

“the church is about to close its doors.”

Fortunately, their satanic sabotage has backfired and today the church numbers more members than any time in its history.

In our own country, the growth of the Christian church has actually out-stripped the increase in population. In more nations than ever before, the name of Christ is held in reverence, as people in large groups and small gather beneath the banner of His cross to sing His praises, ponder His teachings, learn more of His life and receive His salvation.

As we witness the incredible power of the Christian church throughout the whole wide world, as we confront the stability of its standing in the communities of America as well as so many other nations of the earth, it is hard for us to remember the humble beginnings from which it sprang. It was a tiny acorn from which this giant oak of guidance, influence, and fellowship grew.

It all began when a quiet-voiced prophet from despised Nazareth beckoned to a pair of plodding, prosaic fishermen and said,

“Follow Me, and I will make you to become fishers of men” (Matt.4:19).

If we had witnessed that event that day, we would have been given little promise that anything of a lasting nature would come out of it. And yet, that moment in history, unnoticed by all but the

three people actually involved, was one of the most momentous moments in history. For it was then that the Christian church was conceived.

When Peter and Andrew received those words: “Follow Me”, they took to their hearts an acorn of truth which would give guidance to men and nations for all time to come. Indeed, it was a small beginning, but the end is not yet.

That acorn was slow in coming to term. As a matter of fact, the birth pangs of the infant organism were not felt until nearly three years later when, meeting privately with a group of His disciples, Jesus asked,

“Whom do men say that I am?”

You remember their answer:

“Some say that Thou art John the Baptist; some,
Elias; and others, Jeremias, or one of the prophets”
(Matt.16:14).

Then Jesus asked,

“But whom do ye say that I am?” (Matt.16:15).

And Simon Peter answered,

“Thou art the Christ, the Son of the Living God”
(Matt. 16:16).

It was then that we have the first mention of the church in the New Testament, for Jesus replied:

“Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my
church” (Matt.16:18a).

Now this is one of the most misused verses in scripture. It has become a proof-text to support the point of view that Peter was the first Pope when it actually does nothing of the kind.

If we go back to the original Greek in which the scripture was written, we find an interesting play

on words. The Greek word for Peter is “Petros” meaning “a little stone”. But the word Jesus used for rock in this verse is the Greek word “Petra” meaning “big stone”. So a literal translation would therefore read:

“Thou art a little stone, but upon this big stone (your confession that I am the Christ), will I build my church.”

In very truth, this was The Cornerstone Laying Service of the Christian church, for the lordship of Christ is the foundation upon which His church is built.

By the time of Peter's declaration, the number of trusted followers had grown to 70. From that moment when the disciples began to apprehend the true meaning and nature of this Master of men to whom they had committed themselves, their influence as a leavening force in society began to grow.

It seemed to reach its peak on the day of the Triumphal Entry and then suddenly, the new Kingdom of Israel which they had envisioned, was shattered into shambles as the thud of a man being nailed to a cross echoed down the hall of history.

Yes, it looked like The Gates Of Hell had indeed prevailed against the church of Christ on that day of crucifixion. That blackest moment in the affairs of men. But even as many of the faithless followers of Christ scurried for cover, God looked out of His great, high heaven and whispered:

“Now we are really getting somewhere!”

And because of the resurrection which took place a few hours later, that cross has become a battering ram in the hands of Christians throughout the centuries.

Whenever they have courageously attacked The Dominion of Damnation, even the gates of hell could not prevail against them. For when Peter made his great confession,

“Thou art the Christ, the Son of the Living God.”,

there was planted in the hearts of men an acorn of truth which has grown into a gigantic oak of

influence which has overshadowed every adversary.

But it was not until the day of Pentecost that that infant organism, conceived at the time of the choosing of the twelve, and nurtured on the confession of Peter, was fully born. It was then that its earthly ministry began in full force. For on the day of Pentecost, the birthday of the church, the promise of Christ was fulfilled:

“Ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is
come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto Me
both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and in Sumaria,
and unto the uttermost part of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

The message of repentance which Peter preached that day produced 3,000 converts in a single afternoon. As the other disciples went forth, in obedience to the Lord's command, that tiny, scrawny, disjointed baby of a church grew rapidly into a gangling adolescent which seemed to be all arms and legs.

Within one century, it had captured nearly all of the known world of its time. The churches of Jerusalem and Rome were said to number between 25,000 and 50,000 members each.

To be sure, there were growing pains. Such rapid expansion could not help but result in some distortion and difficulty. But throughout the centuries since, whenever Christians have taken the commission of Christ seriously, the church has once again widened its horizons and broadened its borders to enroll new citizens in the Kingdom of God.

For when the church was born on the day of Pentecost and the Holy Spirit came to dwell in the hearts of all believers, an acorn of power was planted which has grown into a gigantic oak, casting a shadow of compassionate care and concern over all who seek shelter within its arms, giving redemption and life to all who heed the message that it sings.

Well, there you have my outline. For out of that small oak of beginning when Jesus said to two

ordinary fishermen, “Follow Me...” has grown a giant oak of Christian **guidance** giving divine direction to the affairs of men.

Out of that little acorn of beginning when Christ praised Peter for his

spiritual insight and said, “Upon
this rock I will build My church and the gates of hell
shall not prevail against it”,

has grown a giant oak of social and moral **influence**, purging society of evil and fashioning it after the principles of the Kingdom of God.

Out of that little acorn of beginning when, according to the promise of Christ, the Holy Spirit came and that infant organism was fully born, a giant oak of compassionate and redeeming **fellowship** has grown, reaching out its arms to encompass the earth.

Now, let me see if I can put some meat on these bones.

I said that, first of all, out of the little acorn of beginning has grown

A GIANT OAK OF DIVINE GUIDANCE AND DIRECTION.

When Jesus said to Peter and Andrew, “Follow Me...”, he was establishing a pattern of behavior for all time to come. He was setting an example which men could follow. And whenever men have followed it...whenever the church has hewn closely to the line which He has drawn...it has gloriously fulfilled its destiny.

There have been times when it walked another road...when it sought to gain the commendation of the world by diluting its message and becoming a cult of conformity. And whenever that has happened...when the church has turned to the world to find out what its gospel ought to be...it has been judged by history and has lost its place of leadership.

But, whenever the church has attempted to understand the problems of mankind...when it has remained the loving critic of its times...when in the Spirit of Christ, it has walked as He has walked and talked as He has talked...when it has said to the world:

“Follow Me and I will make you to become...”

then it has towered above history as a sentinel of strength giving guidance and divine direction to the affairs of men.

And may God help *us* as a church if the world ever comes to us for enlightenment and hears only the echo of its own feeble voice. For the result of such a dark and dreadful hour can only be profound and absolute disillusionment.

Well, how are we going to fulfill our real and noble destiny as the rudder of society? Only by remembering what the church really is: a living organism and not merely an organization.

Dr. Roy Burkhardt suggests:

“Some people marry because they are in love with marriage rather than in love with the person they marry.”

Commenting upon this, Dr. Edwin T. Dahlberg says:

“That is fatal. But it is equally fatal to be in love with the church as an organization

its programs,

its activities,

its committees,

its boards and

athletic teams

without being in love with the Person who is at the heart of the church, namely, Jesus Christ.”

One reason so many people saunter off to the periphery of the church is that they have never had a real experience with Christ and, being a stranger to Him, they are a stranger to the church in its truest meaning.

A young Italian boy knocked one day at the door of an artist's studio in Rome. When it was opened, he exclaimed:

“Please, Madam, will you give me the Master's brush?”

The painter was dead, and the boy inflamed with a longing to be an artist, wished for the great Master's brush.

The lady placed the brush in the boy's hand saying:

“This is his brush. Try it, my son.”

With a flush of earnestness on his face he tried but found he could paint no better than with his own. The lady then said to him:

“You cannot paint like the great Master, unless you have his spirit.”

It is the same with us today. If the church does not have the Master's Spirit, it cannot successfully carry on the Master's work.

But, wherever the people of God determine in their souls that they will

know Christ,

love Christ and

live Christ,

that church becomes a steering gear for society. Not meekly lagging behind...but boldly striding ahead, saying with the confidence born of a genuine humility:

“Follow Me...and I will make you to become...”.

Thank God for such a church! For, as Dahlberg has observed,

“In these days when men are shaking with fear at the

mere thought of global war...when we are living on
the slopes of a nuclear volcano which is gurgling
night and day with the lava of hate...when human
passions are throwing their sulfuric fumes and lurid
glow over every landscape of life...how wonderful to
know there is one great Living Force which could
lead us out of the maze into which our sin has lead
us.”

What joy and hope is given birth at the knowledge that standing over the wrecks of time is the
church of the living Christ, giving guidance and divine direction to those who seek shelter within
its arms.

And then I said that out of the little acorn of beginning, when Christ blessed the confession of
Peter and said,

“Upon this rock I shall build my church...”

out of that little acorn of beginning has grown

THE GIANT OAK OF SOCIAL AND MORAL INFLUENCE.

Almost from the moment of its inception, the Christian church has cast its shadow across the
pages of history. As one historian has put it:

“Within one generation it had penetrated the ancient
Mediterranean world. It re-shaped empires and
survived their falls. It's superior moral and spiritual
qualities destroyed old pagan religions or drove
them into disuse.

“Through the middle ages, it preserved and
transmitted culture into learning. When abuses crept

into its life, it demonstrated a saving ability to
institute and carry through self-reform.

“And in the past 150 years, a new missionary
movement has carried its tenants to the ends of the
earth, expanding its bounds to all the queer and
distant corners of the world.

“There have been ups and downs in its influence, but
the trend has been upward, and today it enjoys the
widest influence in human affairs in its history.”

Go back in time and study the great movements of history which have liberated mankind from the
chains of bondage and you will see that everyone has arisen as a result of the prodding of the
church.

Because of Christian influence, there has come the emancipation of women...
the enabling of children...

the extending of education to the masses...

the giving of medical service to the sick and needy regardless of their economic ability or social
standing.

The church has pled the worth of all human personality regardless of race or color and today, in
some communist nations, church leaders are giving their lives because they raise their voices
against

terror,

brutality and

tyranny.

Call it meddling if you wish, but as Graham A. Hodges reminds us:

“Jesus dared to go to the nations capital and openly defy, among other practices, the outlandish charges made for sacrificial animals. He invited Himself to Zacchaeus' house and thereafter caused him to restore stolen goods. He took it upon Himself to drive the money changers from the temple. And Christ still calls for us to interfere in the course of the world's wickedness and of the selfish ways of mankind.”

That does not mean the church must get into politics. There is very little place for religious pressure groups marching on Washington. That is simply power politics cloaked in the name of religion and can be just as vicious and un-Christian as many of the evils we ought to condemn.

But nonetheless, as Graham Hodges concludes:

“The church at its best pokes itself into all sorts of situations. It dares to tell men they are sinners, and calls them to repentance.”

You see, the key to society is the individual. And by redeeming individuals...by planting within their hearts the stability of great Christian convictions...the church can slowly leaven society with the yeast of Christian truth.

And that is precisely what is happening.

Here at home, over 95,000,000 Americans are now associated with some church. This represents 6 out of every 10 persons in our country. And the other 4 out of 10 can hardly be called

pagans...for they cannot escape the subtle Christian influences which are made upon them every day.

Abroad, the impact of the Christian influence is unbelievable. Dr. S. J. Patterson, one of the leading lights of the Presbyterian church in the United States, recently returned from a tour of South America, Africa and Europe. His comment was that Protestant missionary work abroad is progressing

“beyond anything I could have believed if I had not seen it.”

In the Belgium Congo, for instance, Christian missionaries have succeeded in raising living standards to a point where no woman needs now to bear a child outside of a hospital maternity ward. And in the last year, only three cases of sleeping sickness and only a few of dysentery were reported.

Even behind the Iron and Bamboo Curtains, Christian influence continues to mount. Six British Quakers who visited China last year report that the churches of the great cities of China are functioning normally...with congregations up to 500 in one or two places. An amazing proportion of the audiences are young people. To be sure, when the Communist government came into power, there were some losses in church membership. For the most part, they were “rich Christians”, but those losses have now been made up and Church membership is increasing.

Wherever the banner of the cross is faithfully held high, the conquering Christ calls men unto Himself:

“For the world has seen a great light and the darkness cannot put it out.”

Upon the little acorn of a single man's confession of faith the giant oak of Christian social and moral influence has grown...overshadowing the earth...demonstrating the yeasting power of the right kind of Christian church against whom even the gates of hell cannot prevail.

And then I have said that out of the little acorn of beginning, when the promised power fully possessed the infant church and, in obedience to Christ's command, they went forth as witnesses to capture the world, out of that little acorn of beginning has come

**THE MIGHTY OAK OF A WORLD-WIDE, COMPASSIONATE,
REDEEMING FELLOWSHIP.**

I say it is world-wide...and it is! For wherever on earth you may go, if you are a Christian, you will sooner or later clasp hands with a brother or sister in Christ.

But that compassionate, redeeming fellowship becomes more vivid and tender in the atmosphere of the local church and congregation. I love what the late John Snape once said.

“I enjoy my lodge and luncheon club. I know all the grips and passwords. But when the black-robed messenger stopped his chariot at my door and took away the one I love the most, I arose, not to go down to the lodge and luncheon club, but to stumble out into the out-stretched arms of the Christian church.”

Just this last week, I came across this wonderful expression of affection for the church.

“Before I was born, *my church* gave to my parents ideals of life and love which made my Christian home a place of strength and beauty.

“In helpless infancy, *my church* joined my parents in dedicating me to Christ, in praying for me, and in promising to help me toward a knowledge of Christ.

“*My church* enriched my childhood with the romance of faith and the lessons of the Christian life which have been woven into the texture of my soul. Sometimes I seemed to have forgotten and then, when otherwise I might have surrendered to foolish and futile standards of life, the gospel which *my church* taught became radiant, insistent and inescapable.

“In the stress and storm of adolescence, *my church* heard the urge of my soul and guided my footsteps by lifting my eyes to the living Christ.

“When first my heart knew the strange awakenings of love, *my church* taught me to chasten and spiritualize my affection; she sanctified my marriage and blessed my home.

“When my heart was seamed with sorrow and I thought the sun could never shine again, *my church* drew me to the Friend of all the weary, and whispered to me of another home and the hope of another morning eternal and tearless.”

Truman Douglas once said,

“The church does not *have* a mission, it *is* a mission.”

I believe he is right. For whose business is it:

the winning of the lost...

the strengthening of the weak...

the fortifying of the strong...

the comforting of the sorrowing...

the ministering to the sick...

the feeding of the poor...

the protecting of the homeless...

the healing of the broken-hearted?

If it is not the business of the church, then whose job is it? It is not the job of the service club. It is not the job of the Masons or the P.E.O. It is not the job of the public schools. It is not the job of the government. It is not the job of industry and labor. It is the job of the church!

How important, then, becomes the challenge of the hymn writer.

“Oh Zion haste, Thy mission high fulfilling,
To tell the world that God is light.
That He who made all nations is not willing
One soul should perish, lost in the shades of night.

“Give of thy sons to bear the message glorious
Give of thy wealth to speed them on their way
Pour out thy soul for them in prayer victorious
And all thou spendest Jesus will repay.”

Of course it takes money. Of course it takes time. Of course it takes the stewardship of talent and effort. But if this mighty oak of world-wide, compassionate/redeeming fellowship is to fulfill its mission, then its roots must be constantly fed from the soil of Christian stewardship.

A chronic complainer said to a fellow member,

“Our church is costing too much. They're always asking for money. I'm sick and tired of these repeated requests!”

The other member replied,

“Let me tell you a story right out of my own life. Some years ago, a little boy was born. He cost me money. I had to buy food and clothes and medicine and toys and finally a puppy dog.

“When he started to school, he cost me more. When in college he began going with girls; and you know how much that costs! But in his senior year in college, he suddenly sickened and died. And you know something? He has not cost me a single cent from that time on. Not a single cent.”

As long as the church lives and exerts any influence in this world, it will cost money. As long as religion lives and has any influence in your home and community and helps guide this world, it will cost money. But none of us would want to live in a community or a world which didn't have the church. They tell me Christianity is not costing much money in Russia today.

No, instead of complaining, we ought to thank God that we have a church which is alive and healthy and growing. A church which makes demands upon our stewardship because it *is* alive, healthy and growing. For it's that kind of church which Jesus wants. A mighty oak of a church which spreads it's leafy wings around the community, the nation and the world fulfilling the commission of Christ

“Be My witnesses unto the uttermost parts of the earth.”

Somewhere, I suppose, there is the finest church in all the world. A church which has endeared itself to the very heart of God. On some crossroad where churches stand there is a church which, because of its spirit and the extent of its sacrifice, is loved by the Master above all others.

We do not claim to be that church. But this we *do* claim: that with our eyes upon Christ we are striving to reach the perfection He demands.

As churches go we may be small, but nevertheless we are a door to the greatest fellowship upon this earth: the fellowship of the redeemed.

Yes, I love the church. I love *this* church. I love it because Christ loved it and gave Himself for it.

I love it because it provides for me and my family a guiding rudder of divine direction through the maze of life.

I love it because it provides for me and my family a leavening influence for the society in which we must live.

I love it because it provides for me and my family, and not for us alone, but for all people everywhere who crown Christ King, the shelter and security of a great fellowship

that understands,

that cares,

that redeems.

“I love Thy Kingdom, Lord, the house of Thine abode,

The church our blest Redeemer saved with His own precious blood.

I love Thy church, O God! Her walls before Thee stand
Dear as the apple of Thine eye, and graven on Thy hand.

“For her my tears shall fall, for her my prayers ascend;
To her my cares and toils be given, 'till toils and cares shall end.
Beyond my highest joy I prize her heavenly ways,
Her sweet communion, solemn vows, her hymns of love and praise.”
“So onward Christian soldiers, marching as to war
With the cross of Jesus going on before!”