

THE CHURCH AT WORK

Gary McDade

Now here is a subject that makes uncomfortable those of the salvation by grace alone crowd who march under the banner “salvation without one whit of human activity.” When they have identified themselves with a local congregation, and especially if they serve as preachers, they meet the practical challenge of their doctrine and that is “what does the church do?” They want to write in brotherhood papers and books and speak in meetings and lectureships about salvation by grace alone, but they cannot get their false views to pass the twin tests of “is it Scriptural?” and “is it practical?” The embarrassment with which they write in the local church bulletin when they address such practical issues as attendance at worship and contributing into the church treasury is evident.

A careful study of the New Testament reveals the Church of Christ which is bought with the precious blood of the Son of God and shows it to be organized after a divine pattern with a clear purpose, mission, and destiny (Acts 20:28; Heb. 8:5; Eph. 3:21; Matt. 28:18-20; Rev. 19:7-9). It stands to reason, therefore, that the church is so designed to accomplish some activity or work which God has in mind. It is not placed into writing by inspiration of God simply to be orated and ogled by men. In speaking of the church as the body of Christ, Paul said, “Whereof I was made a minister, according to the gift of the grace of God given unto me by the effectual working of his power “ Eph. 3:7). He was “made a minister,” and a minister is one who serves. This intimates his part in “the church at work.”

In a manner consistent with Christian humility, Paul discussed not the exclusion of works from grace but the harmonious interaction of the two when he wrote, “Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ; And to make all men see what is the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the world hath been hid in God, who created all things by Jesus Christ: To the intent that now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places might be known by the church the manifold wisdom of God, According to the eternal purpose which he purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord”(Eph. 3:8-11).

The church must be at work internally and externally. Internally, the church is divinely designed to nurture and perpetuate itself through the truth. Again, Paul wrote, “Wherefore he saith, When he ascended up on high, he led captivity captive,

and gave gifts unto men. (Now that he ascended, what is it but that he also descended first into the lower parts of the earth? He that descended is the same also that ascended up far above all heavens, that he might fill all things.) And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ: That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive; But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ: From whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love”(Eph. 4:8-16).

The church is to mirror the life of Christ about whom Peter said, “[He] went about doing good . . . for God was with him” (Acts 10:38). As opportunities for doing good abound, the church is not to become “weary in well doing,” for the reward of the labors will come in “due season” (Gal. 6:9-10). The disposition of the workers, or Christians, urged by Paul is, “By love serve one another” (Gal. 5:13).

Since the church is the family of God (Eph. 3:15), it assembles regularly to honor the Father, remember the Son, and receive instruction from the Holy Spirit by means of his word (Jn. 4:23-24; I Cor. 11:23-26; II Tim. 3:16-17). Internally, the church is at work.

Externally, the church is at work preaching the gospel to save the souls of men and women from eternal ruin (Mk. 16:15-16). The example for this was given by Christ (Lk. 19:10). God does not want one single person to be lost (II Pet. 3:9). But, people can be saved only by obeying the gospel, “the power of God unto salvation” (Acts 4:12; Rom. 1:16).

The practice of “pure religion” serves to benefit those less fortunate who have suffered the loss of parents to guide and provide and husbands to comfort and sustain (Jas. 1:27). “The church at work” in this way in the first century promoted the increase of the word of God and will do the same today (Acts 6:7).

Finally, “the church at work” does not serve the function of hyper criticism. Criticism does indeed have a useful and right place among God’s people due to the imperfect nature of man (Gal. 6:1-6). But, hyper criticism which is “carping or

unduly censorious” resolves down to nothing more than murmuring which is defined as “a half-suppressed or muttered complaint: Grumbling” and is condemned in the word of God (Jn. 6:43; I Cor. 10:10; Phil. 2:14).

All of the reasons God had in mind for planning and purchasing the church through Jesus Christ are realized when Christians devote themselves to the study of the word of God, the worship of God, and the work of God. “To make all men see” the eternal realities of the will of God is happening when the church is at work according to the revealed will of God, the Bible. May the prayer of Paul become that of every Christian faithful to God, “Unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen” (Eph. 3:21).