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In Spirit & in Truth

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-- *Commentaries from past newsletters* --

I recently visited a church in a wealthy community. It is a beautiful church inside and out. The architecture blends nicely with the locale. The entrance is unobtrusive and I hardly recognized it as a church entrance. Entering the vestibule I was aware of the beauty of the interior. The sanctuary will, I am sure, seat over 800 if you included the three balconies, and all were full of parishioners. As I surveyed the crowd I could see that they were starched and ironed, but I wondered if they were washed (in the blood of the Lamb). As you faced the organ you noticed that there were six ranks of keys. There were more stops than you could count. There were four sets of visible pipes – two each of large and small pipes with two sets of trumpets placed between the pipes arranged with the largest on top and descending four rows down to the smallest. Surprisingly they did not have a pulpit or lectern. Even so, the floor of the raised area in the front of the choir was of beautifully patterned wood. It was not parquet, but the planks were attractively patterned geometrically. The interior was painted in gold and white. The floor was tastefully carpeted with an aqua colored carpet, and the pews were appropriately upholstered with material of the same color. The padding provided great comfort. In the eight-page bulletin that was printed on quality paper there were all kinds of advertisements for events that were going to take place in the church later in the week and month. A list of prayer requests filled an entire page. The scriptures for the morning service were printed in toto, as were the words to the hymns that were going to be sung.

As the service started I noticed from my seat in the balcony that the heads below me were mostly white or bald. The pastor welcomed us and the announcements were followed by what one could call “passing the peace.” This consisted of greeting the people around us. This accomplished we had a prayer and then sang the first hymn. The rest of the service consisted of a song by the choir, a solo by a soprano during the offertory, a children’s sermon and then the regular sermon. It was biblically based. The pastor asked us to, as Emeril says, “pick it up a notch,” i.e. to make a greater effort to spread the gospel. This sermon was based on the story of Daniel and the lions’ den. Another hymn was sung, the benediction given and a musical benediction response by a baritone and we were dismissed.

The service was completed in good order, and I cannot say that I or anyone around me seemed to have encountered God. Except for the two hymns that were theologically sound, we did not participate in the worship, but we were entertained. To be sure the organ was professionally played, the soloists were wonderfully talented, the choir made beautiful music, and the preaching was enthusiastic and scriptural, but I did not encounter God. I wanted to encounter Him, but I didn’t.

After church we went to a fine country club for brunch. This club was as elegant as the church. The meal was buffet style. I had eggs Benedict, bacon, and coffee. I then had some fresh fruit and finished off my meal with a soft serve ice cream sundae.

I give you this overview of the service and our luncheon because as I later reflected on the service I thought of a service in which I participated in Zimbabwe. This was in a village called Kubaba. Kubaba was in the bush about 100 km off the end of the pavement in the northwestern part of the country. It was close to the Zambezi River but the countryside was semiarid. We approached the church on a dusty road leading to a site that was located behind a harvested field of corn. All that was left in the field was a few stalks that the farmer left at harvesting and the elephants left after their last trip through the area. The building we were approaching was constructed of cinder blocks. No windows or doors were hung. The roof was sheet metal. As we approached the building I noticed that the yard was full of people. I was told that all the people in the community, Catholics, Pentecostals, and others who did not belong to any church were there along with the members of Simon Mkolo's denomination for whom I was dedicating the church. It was a festive day for we were there to dedicate the church. I had been commissioned by the New Directions to dedicate it. We were heartily greeted by the pastor and the elders and welcomed in the Tonga language that Simon translated for us. I and a senior medical student from UNC, Matt Mondri, who I had taken with me, were the guests of honor. Things were in readiness for me to cut the tape to open the church for the first service. The tape turned out to be a piece of string that obviously had seen better days. There was a pair of dull scissors, if one could call them that, to cut the ribbon (string). We did so as I prayed saying that I was opening the building to be a place where all could come to worship the Lord. I wanted Him to be glorified in the building. After the opening ceremony we entered and found a dirt floor and pews that were boards laid across cinder blocks. There was a raised area of dirt in front where we were taken to conduct the service. I noted that the cinder blocks in the walls were crudely laid. The building probably would seat no more than 50 people.

Because the natives love music we started with an hour of singing. The musician, who had a guitar with only three strings on it, began to strum and the people began to sing and dance. The music was their own native Christian music that was more a chant than anything else. They danced to it with a little two-step. Even so with each song the tempo increased. I watched in awe as the pastor who was leading the worship really "got down" after the fourth or fifth song. What I was hearing and seeing was heartfelt praise. Even though I could not translate the words of the song, I could, nevertheless, see that these worshipers were participating in the worship. All of us knew with certainty that Jesus was there worshiping with us.

The people were dressed in rags, barefoot with poor personal hygiene, but they were worshiping God in spirit and truth. They were not starched and ironed, but they were washed (in the blood of the Lamb). Their praise and worship continued for over an hour as Matt and I sat awestruck. It finally came time for a prayer, then the collection was taken that netted little from these poor people. It was a good collection, though, for Matt

and I contributed 20 Zimbabwean dollars each. What we gave constituted the bulk of the collection.

It was now time for me to preach. I have to admit that I did not meet their expectations in terms of the length of my sermon. Their pastors usually preach for two hours and I only preached for one. To be honest I did not know better. This threw a monkey wrench in the works for the women had not finished cooking the food for the dedication banquet.

I thought I brought a good message since I used as my scripture the story of Solomon building the temple for a place for God to reside in Israel. I reminded them that this church was being dedicated to provide a place for people to collectively worship God. I told them it was built for Jesus to come to worship with them since he lived in them. When it was over I could not determine how they received it.

The cooks finally got the main course made of “mealie meal” cooked. Mealie meal is a finely ground cornmeal, mixed with water, boiled and made in patties. They had earlier prepared meat and gravy that consisted of roast goat and roast guinea fowl. Our plates were brought to the pastors’ house where we could sit on stools to eat. The rest of the congregation ate standing in the churchyard. They gave each of us two large patties of the cornmeal mush that were shaped like dumplings. The roast goat with gravy was served over one patty, and roast guinea fowl with gravy over the other. The gravy was good, but the goat was tough and the guinea fowl was skinny with little meat on its bones. For them this was a feast. As Matt, Simon, the pastor and I ate there were three children outside of the thatched roof hut shyly watching us. When I made a comment that I could not eat all of the meal, Simon reassured me that the children would finish it off. They did! Matt ate all of his.

After thinking about the Zimbabwean church my thoughts wandered to another occasion where we were worshiping with Nepalis in a church in Katmandu. There were two hundred people sitting on mats with crossed legs on the smooth cement floor. They gave us one of the two benches they had to sit on. The congregation of about 200 had been worshiping for over 30 minutes by the time we arrived. Again they were enthusiastically singing their own native songs and rocking to the beat. They could not dance because they were sitting and the church was crowded. Even so their enthusiasm was apparent. I was awed by the knowledge that everyone in that room had been a Hindu two years before except the minister. This congregation too was not starched and ironed, but they were washed (in the blood of the Lamb). The preacher had only been a Christian for three years. We did not hear from him since the preaching done this day was by J. L. Williams. He was enthusiastic and his sermon was biblically based. By the response of the congregation I knew that they too knew that Jesus was worshiping with them for their prayer and worship was fervent. As I watched I felt that Jesus was there with me. We did not stay to eat after the service even though they were to have a meal.

These three services were in marked contrast to one another. The settings and the racial differences of the congregations were profound. The socioeconomic levels of the people were also profoundly different. The educational levels of the pastors were in marked contrast to one another. The purpose of all three services was to worship the Lord. In the first service I described the people were worshiping in safety with no concern for their supply of food. In the second service the people who lived in poverty had to be concerned because they lived in an arid part of the country with barely enough rain to raise a crop each year. Then too marauding elephants and lions posed a constant threat. In the Nepali service the people knew that Hindu militants or Maoists might burn their church or murder their pastor and might even take their lives, but they still worshiped the Lord in Spirit and truth.

The two indigenous churches had been established by men who had taken the gospel into the marketplace and won converts who in turn had also won converts. Simon had started his church by preaching under the trees as he wandered from village to village. He would go to a tree in a village, sing a hymn and then preach. When enough people had responded he organized a church. When we were there he had over 300,000 parishioners in his scattered churches. Hanok Tamong had been studying for the Buddhist priesthood when he was converted and began preaching wherever he could get an audience. In time he got a church started and with evangelical outreach established many more. The people in both churches were aggressively evangelical even though it could cost them everything--even their lives. Today Hanok has over 160 evangelists in the field. They evangelize even though their lives are at peril, for the Maoists (communists) go after them first because they think they may have some money. Still they fearlessly proclaim the gospel.

These same things were especially true in the first three hundred years of the early church's existence. Although the stories of Christians being thrown to the lions is emphasized they were also crucified, put to the sword, burned alive and killed by other means. Even so the church grew. It is no wonder that Tertullian could say that the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church. It was in his day and is today.

Why is there such a difference between our churches and third world churches? I think I read the answer back in my teen years. In 1938, near the end of the great depression, when I was a senior in high school I read an article in the *Saturday Evening Post* that said that the strength of peoples' faith varied with the affluence of a society. That was all I remembered about the article, but it certainly seems to be true today.

Visualize in your mind the difference between the churches I described. I would suspect that the income of the people at the church in the US was probably in the hundreds of thousands. In Zimbabwe it was less than 100 dollars a year. In Nepal it was no more than 300 dollars a year. It has become increasingly clear to me that the affluence of our society has a dulling effect on our faith. Jesus said that it is harder for a rich man to get into heaven than it is for a camel to go through the eye of a needle. Money has a tendency to take our eyes off God and put them on material things. If we really think about it, our real needs are limited. All we need is protection from the elements, 2500 calories a day of nourishment, and a job that will provide us with the necessities of life and transportation to get to and from our work.

Admittedly the world has changed from Jesus' day. There are many more people, we are more technologically advanced, and we have learned how to produce food with a minimum of effort. Because there are more of us and our manufacturing efforts are consolidated, we cannot live close to our work. In my youth the local textile and tobacco industries provided housing for their

employees that were within walking distance of the textile mill. It was not fancy housing but it was cheap and in most instances adequate. The tobacco factories were not far from housing and easily reached on public transportation. In the early days of our nation we lived in an agrarian economy, we walked out of the door and our work was all around us. Our food supplies were things we raised and preserved by canning or salting. We made our raiment at home. We wove cloth in our home and sewed it by hand. Later on we had sewing machines, but during most of our history we did it by hand. Transportation was on horseback, wagon or on foot. Our fields were cultivated by oxen or horses pulling a pointed stick in the ground. There were no moldboard plows until much later. We harvested everything by hand, although we did have sickles early and scythes later to help us. Our meat was mostly chicken that we ate immediately, and pork that we killed ourselves and preserved by salting and smoking. Everything we did was heavy labor. That certainly is not true today.

Today most of us live in the suburbs. We commute to our work over long distances. We have to have cars since public transportation is not easily available. On the farm we plow with tractors, disk the fields and turn up the rows if necessary with appropriate attachments. When we harvest corn and other grains we have harvesters that can take four rows or more of corn and cut wide swaths of grain, separate the grains of corn, wheat or oats from the shucks and chaff and blow the grain into a bin on the harvester or truck along side. One man can do what fifty used to do and do it in air-conditioned comfort.

In many parts of the world people are still working at a primitive level. They have to walk to most of the places they go so it is never far. I have seen them plowing with a pointed stick pulled by scrawny oxen and harvesting corn or grain by hand. That was true in both Zimbabwe and Nepal.

Having contrasted the economies of the countries where these three churches were located, why is there such a difference in the worship of the people in them? The answer is that in the third world countries the people are involved in the worship. How we got the idea that people worship when someone else does the singing and praying probably arose after Constantine when the church was organized hierarchically. I believe that the church gradually adopted the Jewish form of worship where the priest spoke to God for the people and the Levites did all the singing and praising. This persisted until the Protestant reformation when people were able to read the Bible in their own language and learned that they too could be involved in worship. No one told them before that they too could pray and sing and now all of a sudden they found out that they could.

In the early days of our country on the frontier, people were able to really worship God, read the Bible, and pray. Most often their leader was a Bible reading layman. Their faith was strong. Then came affluence and pipe organs were put in churches, choirs were formed, and the pastor did all the praying. Parishioners were to tell him who to pray for and he did.

This caused God to put a veil over their eyes and to plug their ears with celestial wax so that they do not see and do not hear. God is fully aware of the blindness and deafness of his people. I always wondered why Jesus said, "Let him who has ears hear." He also said that he spoke to the people in parables "because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand" (Matthew 13:13). Our churches today are filled with people who are unsaved and/or spiritually dead. I have to admit that until recently I got angry with them. They sit Sunday after Sunday routinely singing hymns listening to the sermons and prayers, and they do not encounter God. Yet their lives during the week are devoid of prayer and worship and their personal lives are no better than the lives of many of the unchurched with whom they work and socialize. They sin alike in that they do not give God the honor due him by obeying his commandments.

Not only did Jesus say that people's eyes are veiled and their ears plugged but their understanding is also veiled. Todd Bently (prophet from Vancouver) recently wrote about this problem of understanding in an article published on the *Elijah List* (www.Elijahlist.com). In it he said that both God and the devil can put a veil over people that prevents them from seeing and hearing and understanding. In our country and especially in our churches this has happened. I believe it is God when the leadership does not involve the people in the worship and instead relegates them to the role of spectators. I believe it is the Devil when the people worship other Gods, especially the God of money (Mammon).

I may have mentioned before that I belong to a group in my town called Ministers in Prayer. Every Tuesday morning we meet for one hour and pray for revival in our town. We pray that God will send his Holy Spirit to our churches to wake up the sleeping congregations. We pray that we may be anointed to motivate them to proclaim the Gospel. We want God to do something because our city and many churches in it are awash in sin. Gangs, alcoholism, drug addiction, prostitution, divorce, child molestation, incest, you name it, we have it. Outside our group there is little prayer. In our churches there is little life. Only two pastors from mainline churches belong to our group, and when they have been asked to join us they always have an excuse as to why they cannot participate. One pastor said that he was going to run his own group to break down racial prejudice, another said he could meet on Thursday, but when we scheduled a second meeting on that day he has never attended in spite of reminders.

There is spiritual apathy in our churches, and to be honest we who are praying about it do not know what to do about it except to keep on praying for the Holy Spirit to light a fire in them. Still it is hard to believe that the churches will come alive if the pastor is apathetic too. They apparently do not believe what John Wesley said that everything happens with prayer and nothing without it. Perhaps they do not see the need and they are not disturbed by the problems in the community. Most of them only read about them in the paper and are isolated from the consequences of sin. Most of them do not have to conduct funerals for

their parishioners who have been murdered, or counsel the families of children who have been molested by staff members. They do, though, have parishioners who have committed adultery, but then they do it too. They also divorce their wives just like their parishioners do.

In many churches people accept sin and even approve of it. The most glaring example of acceptance of sin is in the Episcopal church where they have accepted the ordination of a homosexual bishop, and tacitly approved of homosexual marriages. I have to say that some of their churches have not accepted it and withdrawn, but most of them continue to support the church and its policies. They have believed the lies of Satan propagated by male homosexuals and lesbians in the hierarchy and bureaucracy of the church.

The other problem in churches today is the relativization of the authority of scripture. Until the development of German inspired "higher criticism" and its acceptance by theologians in divinity schools in the US, the Bible was accepted as the authoritative resource for faith and practice for Christians. At least it was by most churches. Today this is not so. The Bible is considered a myth by many theologians and they do not believe that it has any more authority than the person's own belief system. There is some reason why this came about. There is, for instance, a lot of archeological evidence that supports the Bible, but there is a serious lack of evidence supporting other aspects. For instance, there is only one artifact that supports the reign of King David. One would think that there should be more than one. On the other hand the existence of Hezekiah's tunnel is unequivocal evidence that he existed and the Bible was confirmed by its discovery. More recently the ossuary (bone box) that has written on it "James the Brother of Jesus," is locked in controversy. The Israeli Antiquities Authority is prosecuting its owner as a perpetrator of a fraud even though in the opinion of many experts it is genuine. It dates back to a time just after Jesus' death. Satan does all he can to prevent the veracity of the Bible from being corroborated. On the whole, though, there is enough archeological evidence to corroborate it.

The other attack on the authority of the Bible is the utilization of science to undermine it. One of the major contributions of Sigmund Freud was to assert that religion was a neurosis. It is clear that Freud could not see religion through eyes that had been opened by the Holy Spirit nor had he ever seen healthy religion so he could not have believed other than he did. Freud's beliefs, which were accepted by the secular world and some of the Christian world, did much to undermine the authority of the Bible. This undid the moral authority of the church, so hedonism has abounded.

What shall we do? We should repent and ask God to send revival. He has done it before and he will do it again. We should once again take our cities and our country for God. We do, however, need leadership that will call us to repentance. That leadership should exhort us to pray fervently for God to heal

our land. Prayer is the answer to our moral depravity – prayers of confession and repentance.

Week after week I sit and listen to the stories of persons who have suffered the consequences of their own sin or the sins of others. Sin has consequences that leave deep emotional scars on the souls of those affected. They suffer until God heals them. In those who have sinned there was created a moral paralysis and they have continued to sin and reap more negative consequences. The ultimate consequence that will be suffered will come on judgment day. Imagine an unbelieving sinner standing before God. He has never believed and has mocked God. He or she will be without excuse. All of their sins are laid out before them. Imagine what they are feeling. They are filled with horror. The consequences of what they have done are too painful to imagine. Hell is no vacation place.

Now is the time for us to mobilize and pray fervently. Nothing else will heal our land.