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ESSAYS

ALL CONSUMING FIRE

What We Can Do If We Are In a Dead Denominational Church

"Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our "God is a consuming fire."

--Hebrews 12:28, 29--

In this day when the moral fiber of our society is deteriorating at an ever increasing rate, it is absolutely essential that we take a prophetic stance and speak out and apply God's Word to the current situation. I do not claim to be a prophet, but I can speak prophetically since a prophet applies God's Word to the current situation¹. I can speak prophetically to an individual, to a special group in society, or to the community as a whole. In this article I wish to speak to evangelicals who are tired of being in a mausoleum.

I grew up in the United Methodist church. When I became a Christian in 1966 (*The Grace to Grow*), I was soon caught up in the Lay Witness movement in the United Methodist Church. It did not take me long to realize that in spite of the dramatic changes taking place in the lives of United Methodist lay persons, the church in general continued to wither. I am sure lay witnessing was an instrument sent by God to establish or renew faith in a large number of sleeping United Methodists. It was enormously successful in that it brought a huge number of persons into a new relationship with the Lord. There was, however, a sad ending to the movement. The church did not know what to do with the hundreds of thousands who had this new or renewed faith. It has been said that one should not put a new born baby to a dead mother's breast. It will starve to death. Untold thousands of them did starve. Others of the many who either participated in missions as witnesses or who were awakened, began a futile effort to wake up their church or left the UMC for independent or other mainline denominations. If one goes to an Assembly of God, Vineyard, Calvary Temple or Southern Baptist

church you will be amazed at the number of persons worshipping there who were reared in or were former members of the UMC. I have five children who are born again Christians and only one of them goes to a UMC church.

During those years as I became more theologically literate, I found the theology of John Wesley was of me the most balanced I could find. The only problem was that it was not the theology of the UMC. It had been so perverted one could not recognize it. The only thing kept was the episcopal system of church government. To me it was obvious the church needed renewal, and needed to return to the scriptural Christianity of John Wesley. I did, therefore, seek to do all I could to discover the means of renewing the church.

I wanted to be involved, so I joined up with Good News. When I first came in contact with them they were confronting the church about curriculum resources. This really agitated the bureaucracy and the hierarchy. Not only did Good News confront the church, but they made an effort to effect change by the political process. They were present at annual, jurisdictional and general conferences. They tried to get as many persons elected as delegates as possible. They hoped to out vote the opposition and effect change politically. Alas, this was not to be. Almost all of the clergy members of the conferences were appointed from the liberal wing of the church. At least one-half of the lay members were satisfied with the church the way it was so they would not vote for change. All of them wanted the Good News people to be quiet and go away. After several years it became apparent to me that Good News was not going to effectuate the change I wanted to see. I remained in their camp, but realized that the reality of their position was more likely to be that of "watchman," not an effector of change (Ezek. 33:6). The question remained in my mind "Can this church that subscribes to so much heresy be renewed?"

I was still optimistic even though I could not see Good News making progress. Then the great charismatic congress was held in Kansas City in 1978. I did not identify with the charismatic movement at that time for I did not understand it, but I went to the conference at the invitation of Ross Whetstone the associate secretary of evangelism in the Board of Discipleship. I have to admit I was overwhelmed with the move of the Holy Spirit at that conference. There were 800+ United Methodists in attendance and they all believed the church could be renewed by the Holy Spirit. At the attendees insistence we organized to do it. Tommy Tyson, Robert Stamps, Robert Tuttle, Ross Whetstone and I were the organizing committee. Ross became our part time executive secretary and we added enough persons to the board to have representation from across the church.

Our initial efforts seemed to bear fruit. We held a number of local Holy Spirit Conferences and each year held national conferences that were well attended, but there was no real move of the Holy Spirit except in these conferences. If there had been fire, it would have spread across the church and renewal would

have occurred. In time I realized that we were a little sect in the church and that we too were not effecting change. The church was still wasting away at a rate of 50 to 70,000 parishioners a year. Because I had now spent twenty years in the renewal movement and seen little change I became convinced that we needed to listen to the Lord, find out what **he** wanted, and to do **his will** (John 2:5). Again I ran into opposition. My own people did not want to pray and listen until we heard from God. They were happy for me to pray, but they would not join me. Their attitude was that we had to get on with the business and develop the right program. Discouraged, I decided to put my efforts into other kingdom work. God has blessed me in my ministry, but it has had no effect on the UMC or the larger number of its members.

Like our Lord Jesus weeping over Jerusalem (Luke 19:41-42) I weep over the UMC. But its fate seems assured. With the average age of congregations at 58 years it will be a ghost church in a few years if renewal does not take place. There are no young people in the church! Quite obviously there is little to attract them.

But like Israel there is a remnant of people who love the Lord and possess the potential to serve the Lord in obedience. They would love to worship in a church based on Wesleyan principles. John Wesley understood the necessity of encountering the Lord experientially. He also understood the necessity of discipleship. He strongly believed in the priesthood of **all** believers. He did not expect the minister to be the only minister or the congregation to just congregate. He wanted everyone to be involved in ministry. We need a church that follows his precepts.

REALISTIC EVALUATION

To begin our search for the means of renewing any mainline denominational church, we should begin by looking realistically at the state of the church. When we do this, the first thing we can see is that heresy and apostasy are rife. The gay rights and radical feminist caucuses have found supporters among the hierarchy, bureaucracy, clergy and laity. Even though they get defeated in general conferences they keep coming back, and coming back and coming back trying to wear down their opposition. What could be more heretical than the Re-Imagining seminar held in Minneapolis several years ago? The teaching in that conference was never officially repudiated by the church. How could it be when a church agency was one of the sponsors? They put Sophia, another god, before our God. One does not celebrate communion with milk and honey! The Re-Imagining Conference was then followed up with a youth conference that was equally heretical in its teaching. I am being generous with my criticism for what they did is apostasy. They have denied the living God and worshiped another.

The second thing we can see is that the seminaries with few exceptions are staffed with liberal theologians who reject the authority of the scriptures². If God's

Word is truth, we need to live according to its precepts. David made this plain in Psalm 119. Throughout this Psalm he extols the virtue and value of God's Word. If we are training ministers who do not believe the Word of God, we will not have a godly church³.

Third, we cannot expect a local church to survive if the clerical leadership is constantly changing. Itineration of pastors in the UMC does not allow for continued leadership. The rapid turnover in other denominations has a similar effect. When a pastor has only 4-6 years in an assignment, it is impossible to bring about renewal. Pluralism in the pulpit does not help people develop a solid biblical faith empowered by the Holy Spirit. A person does not know what she believes when she hears different interpretations of what the Bible says. We encounter God in his Word.

People stay in a church for two reasons. They enjoy the social interaction, or they encounter Christ there. Those who are seeking encounters with Christ leave the church because they do not encounter him there. They seek Him where he can be found. They are heeding the scriptural statement, "You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart (Jer. 29:13)." They find Him in those churches where the music, prayer, teaching and preaching are biblical and in the Spirit. The statistics show that they seldom find Him in a Methodist church.

Another reality of the church is the structure of local church government. That it is designed to fail is true of all denominations. Whether it is the board of deacons, the session, or the official board, there are always too many people on most of them. In my Methodist church there were over 40 persons all with equal voting privileges. Most of them were not fit to serve. They were either not Christians, or they did not know what they were to do. They did not know the purpose of the church. Above all, most of them were not guided and directed by the Holy Spirit. They saw the church as a business, not as an instrument of God. All they could do was to support the pastor's initiative. Unfortunately some pastors did not know the purpose of the church either. Because it was difficult to get people to serve they were not replaced. With long tenure they became a power structure and essentially ran the church as they thought it should be run. One man in our church had been chairman of the board of trustees for 20 consecutive years. He was finally replaced, but only after a "knock down, drag out fight." This power structure can be vicious in their efforts to control. When the pastor parish relationship committee tried to fire an organist who had been insubordinate, those members of the power structure who backed the organist went to the Bishop and the District Superintendent and tried to force the church to back down. When the hierarchy backed the power structure, the committee refused to reverse their decision. The organist was fired and left with several choir members. Those who stayed openly told the minister that they would get rid of him. The District Superintendent continued to side with them. They succeeded in making his life miserable and he left. I do not know how many times I have heard this same story in many denominations and in independent churches. Large

governing bodies are too easily manipulated by aggressive and dominating personalities.

Another major problem of the mainline churches is the bureaucracy. When I was on the Curriculum Resources Committee of the UMC, I served with a lesbian, a radical feminist and a card carrying communist, all were bureaucrats from the Board of Global Ministries and the Board of Church and Society. Two of them were on the family life committee that I chaired. With their fellow travelers, it made committee work almost impossible since they had been sent to promote the agenda of their agency. Their agenda was to promote radical feminism and the acceptance of alternate lifestyles, mainly homosexuality. There were other liberals who desired to expunge biblical teachings from the literature for the youth. Since these bureaucrats are accountable to a board whose new members are appointed by themselves they will not change. They will do nothing to facilitate renewal.

Finally bishops either have no power or if they do, they do not exercise it. While on the Curriculum Resources Committee during two quadrennia, only on one occasion did I see the three bishops I served under exercise leadership. They seemed ineffectual and disinterested. In the several annual conferences in which I have worked, I find it is a rare exception that bishops do anything other than see to it that pastors are regularly moved, and put out fires when pastors get in trouble. Most importantly the support of many bishops for gay rights and radical feminist causes, without doubt will contribute to the demise of the church. Most graphically, a bishop who was well known in the gay community and died of AIDS tells us something about some of the people who are elected to the office.

I have only touched on a few of the major problems in the church with which I am most familiar, but they are found in every mainline denomination. They do illustrate my point. Space does not allow a lengthy discussion.

It is my purpose to challenge those evangelicals who are promoters of scriptural Christianity. It is a hopeless cause to continue ignoring or confronting the church. It is time we do something concrete. What can we do? Quite obviously we do not need to develop new programs. Programs have brought about our current state. I have seen innumerable programs developed, and I would say that all of them have failed. We do not need new Holy Spirit conferences where we can whoop it up and tickle our souls. We do not need more congresses or conferences on evangelism. We do not need more publications encouraging the church to change. Certainly we do not need more statements calling us to go back to our roots. We need an action plan.

AN ACTION PLAN

Realistically our action plan has to take two paths. If we want to renew present congregations by revolution, we must be willing to make sacrifices. We will be

persecuted because any effort to raise the spiritually dead brings about reaction. Every effort to effectuate change will bring about a defensive effort to maintain the status quo. Evangelical pastors and lay persons alike can testify to this assertion. Revolutionary renewal of old congregations requires time. It takes at least six years to bring it to pass. Unfortunately the instability of pastoral tenure makes it impossible for him to bring renewal to fruition since his effective ministry in a six year rotation can only be four years. The first year is spent getting to know the congregation and all of its assets and liabilities, the last year is a lame duck year since the pastor knows he is certain to be moved. His or her enthusiasm for the current work always decreases.

The second path is to leave the denominational church as a body and become independent. Several UMC churches have done this. I know of two in North Carolina, another in Delaware, and a recent defection in Nebraska. There are many who would like to go, but are restrained by monetary considerations. They do not want to leave their church property, and the pastors do not want to lose their pensions and other fringe benefits. Most who stay cling to the delusion that the church just might change. The problem is that congregations trickle away or grow older and die as nothing happens. Even pastors are leaving because they feel constrained. In the meantime, apostasy and heresy abounds in the church. Every denomination now has churches that have left in mass and become independent or joined truly evangelical denominations.

Let me say at the beginning that no person can change a church alone. They have to have others who are interested in bringing about change. If a person is alone in their desire for change they should leave and find a church that can meet their needs.

The following is a course of action that has changed churches in the past, or provided a vibrant faith for those who join together to seek it. I will discuss them in the order of importance.

FAITH

We should begin by strengthening our faith, for "By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh's daughter. He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a short time. He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward. By faith he left Egypt, not fearing the king's anger; he persevered because he saw him who is invisible (Heb 11:24-27)." Obviously we have to paraphrase this scripture to fit our situation and let it read as follows. By faith we refuse to be part of a church that promotes heresy and apostasy. When we do so, we choose to be reviled for our opposition. It surely will happen. We must choose to be condemned and criticized along with the people of God rather than tolerate the sinful behavior of the church. We can regard disgrace for the sake of Christ as of

greater value than church buildings and pensions. We will even leave the church or denomination if necessary not fearing the hierarchy's anger because we see Him who is invisible leading us out of the sin that is so rampant. Unfortunately, if we stay we will remain in slavery. What then should we do? We have weapons let us use them. We must rededicate our lives to God and ask for more faith and more power.

PRAYER

Any group including or not including the pastor must begin to pray corporately for direction. Every great revival in Christendom has begun when people pray. The great Welsh revival, the South African revival that began in Andrew Murray's church began with regular corporate prayer. I recently was given a little book that described a revival that occurred in China before the communist revolution. It began with corporate prayer by a group of Baptist missionaries and exploded to involve the entire countryside. It is necessary that those persons who want to see the church renewed pray corporately for revival at least one night a week. There should be prayer retreats where as many people as will attend will pray and listen to the Lord for one entire weekend. John Wesley is reputed to have said that everything happens with prayer and nothing without it. I cannot find the statement in his collected works, but if he did not say it he could have because of his belief in prayer. Listening is part of any prayer effort. God does speak to us and we should know that he has said, ". . .my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways (Isa. 55:8)." Since He is the source of power for renewal in the church, we should seek to know his thoughts and his ways. Our wisdom is foolishness. I know, I have spent years listening to it and foolishly trying to design and carry out events that would help to renew the church. They all failed.

DISCIPLESHIP

We must make a concerted effort to disciple our people. I did a study of United Methodists, Presbyterians, and Episcopalians a few years ago⁴ and found that only 5% had been truly disciplined. They did not know how to pray, study the Bible, know God's will, know anything about the work and person of the Holy Spirit, understand the role of communion in their lives, nor did they know how to witness. Most did not know the plan of salvation either. Wesley knew that his converts needed to be disciplined, so he set up classes to turn them into mature Christians who could follow Jesus' commandments and bring glory to God. Space does not permit a presentation of the rules he had for his classes, but they were so stringent that they go far beyond what we demand of church members today. When followed, these persons became Christians with power! They spread fire on the earth. They were true disciples.

PERSONAL PIETY

The third thing we need to do is to make sure that all of us enlisted in this effort spend at least one hour a day in prayer and Bible study. It is possible for all of us to accomplish this. I am told that Wesley wanted his pastors to spend 3 to 4 hours a day in those pursuits. Why can't we spend at least one hour? Our efforts should not be guided by the *Upper Room*. We need to pray and study the Bible guided and directed by the Holy Spirit. Only when we are renewed in our inner self through constant communication with God are we going to have real power. With power we can guide the church and our country back to God.

Lastly, we should covenant to be faithful to this plan for one or more years. It is too easy to do these things for a week or two and then have our efforts poop out. Jesus in his story of the man who came at midnight said, "Suppose one of you has a friend, and he goes to him at midnight and says, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread, because a friend of mine on a journey has come to me, and I have nothing to set before him.' Then the one inside answers, 'Don't bother me. The door is already locked, and my children are with me in bed. I can't get up and give you anything.' I tell you, though he will not get up and give him the bread because he is his friend, yet because of the man's boldness he will get up and give him as much as he needs (Luke 11:5-8)." We have to come boldly before the throne and make our desires known. We have to keep on asking! We cannot be fainthearted.

Until we do these things all the confrontation, political machinations, programs, leadership and other special seminars as well as the other things that we can think of will be to no avail. I have been a Christian for 33 years and the only thing that I have successfully affected in the right direction in the church were lay witness missions. I would love to see something really happen to preserve our heritage before I die. I do not have much longer at age 79, so I am in a hurry. If we do these things I do not know what will happen. Perhaps nothing. God may have already cut off our apostate church and we will have to watch it die. Even so, I think it is worth the effort to try to find out what he wants us to do.

WORSHIP

If we are to have an alive and renewed church we need to enliven our worship. Our music should be in the idiom of those we are bringing into the church out of the world. They do not appreciate 16th century Slavic tunes, or Gregorian chants. They like more contemporary tunes. It is necessary that our music leaders be selected because they are first Christians and secondarily musicians. Charles Wesley's hymns were cached in the musical idiom of the day. They made the early Methodist church what it grew to be.

Next we have to preach and teach the Word. If it is as Paul says sufficient to make us wise for salvation, and useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness then we have to believe it is inerrant and make it the basis for our faith. But its use will only be of value if we preach and teach in the

Spirit. God's Word will not come back void when sent out (Isa 55:10-11) anointed by the Holy Spirit. If we cannot do that because of the deficiencies of our education, we can memorize Wesley's sermons. They were a series of scripture neatly tied together to make his point. In our sermons and teachings we need to always offer them Christ.

DISCIPLESHIP

Next we have to disciple our people. We need to teach them to pray, how to study the Bible, how to know God's will, how to witness and to know the work and person of the Holy Spirit. Above all they need to know the attributes of God. Most people have a distorted image of Him.

Then we have to involve everyone in ministry. We should be a priesthood of believers. In our churches we should not have a minister who ministers, and a congregation that congregates. Jesus gave the great commission to all of us and not just to people who went to seminary. We need to go into the prisons, the hospitals, the bars, the restaurants, the offices and factories of our nation. We need to go to the poor and downtrodden. The world is full of spiritually diseased persons. They need Christ. Only He heals spiritual disease. We are to be His witnesses to the ends of the earth.

CHANGING OUR ATTITUDE

To begin this process we need to have a service of rededication in our churches. In this service each of us needs to confess and repent of our sins of inaction. We must be truly sorry for failing to live up to our Lord's commandments; sorry for having let the world's agenda be ours; sorry for letting heresy and apostasy abound in our denominations; sorry for saying nothing about abortion and pornography; sorry for electing leaders who promote sin; and sorry for tacitly approving sinful behavior by our church leaders by leaving them in office. We have to promise to do God's agenda.

In this rededication service, we need to tell God in all sincerity that we are absolutely surrendering our lives to him no matter what the cost. We must promise that we will go where He tells us to go and do what he tells us to do. After the service we need to listen to God regularly to hear what he wants us to do. We must then go do it.

SUMMARY

Do I expect this to happen? No, I don't! People as old as those in most mainline congregations are not likely to want fire in their bones. "Leave us alone, and let us die in peace," is their attitude. "We have been nice, sweet, kind people who have done good." Even so, wouldn't it be wonderful if forty or a hundred churches would do this and fire would fall? The whole world would come and watch them

burn. Maybe then the fire would spread across our church and cover the earth as Jesus desired (Luke 12:49).

Can the mainline denominations be changed? I don't know, but the people who will do what I have proposed above will be changed and will either reform the church or will leave and establish new ones that can be proudly Christian. They will not be a dead sect. The solution is simple. Prayer, biblical preaching and teaching, witnessing to the end of the earth, and making real disciples of those who come in is all that it takes. That's what Paul and John Wesley did. It will change churches in any denomination. Our daily prayer should be.

*Set us afire Lord, stir us we pray
While the world perishes, we go our way
Purposeless, passionless day after day.
Set us afire Lord, stir us we pray.*