

The Indivisible Congregation

In the Modern Era, much has been tried to show how Churches are best governed. History has proven that the Best Intentioned Ideas of MEN are Dysfunctional when compared to the Practical early New Testament Church.

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“Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!” These are the well-known and oft quoted opening words of the 133rd Psalm, which reflect a deep desire among all brethren of good intentions. But unity is more than dwelling together in peace. There also needs to be a cohesiveness that endures when there is a threat to that unity.

The desired condition can be ever so elusive, when challenges arise, even within the very Church of God. Congregations that seem to be together in times of relative tranquility can find themselves in disarray when disruptions come. It is the rare individual who hasn't experienced a split or two in the time of his or her affiliation. Those splits are more often generated by leading ministers who see their prestige as a matter of utmost importance.

Peace as Never Before!

What is especially ironic are the pronouncements after a split, of “peace as never before” in the aftermath of one of these separation experiences, when brethren (usually the ministry) find, for whatever reason, that they just can not continue to “walk together” after having done so for some time. But the pronouncements of “peace and harmony”, that usually break forth, following some negative development, is often followed by another round of the same sad experience, years down the road. This has been our legacy. Do we understand the fundamental dynamics of why it continues to happen?

Let's consider some of the cultural factors that have created the conditions we have seen play out time and time again. What is it that leaves us so susceptible to being divided?

Ministerial Myopia

It is the rare congregation that doesn't operate under a ministry that retains the main focus upon **itself**, and reserving all decisions to itself. The membership is allowed no real say in the decisions and policies that affect them individually and collectively. They're assigned their minister and are not allowed any say in that assignment. They can't object, and only through great efforts can they (occasionally) get the man dismissed if he proves to be a bad example. His administrators refer all complaints right back to him to deal with, should there be any members with concerns and with the courage to speak out.

Not only are the members excluded from input, the leading ministry excludes the general field ministry from involvement in much of the decision making process also. This is reflected in the insulting statement offered decades ago by a leading evangelist that, “God would never reveal anything to the likes of you”!!

Add to that, a ministry that much of the time is embroiled internally with interpersonal rivalries and political intrigues. Climbing the political ladder is a major interest among those who covet the chief seats. It factors into much of what they do. Promotions are often based on considerations other than their competence level. This happens in a lot of organizations. Here too is an area where member input would be invaluable, if it were ever sought.

Spreading the WORD

Then we come to the area of expression of faith on the various levels often referred to under the category of “personal evangelism”. Typically, there's a reaction within the ministry that holds under suspicion any use of a Gift or Talent God

may have chosen to provide, without their involvement or prior authorization. Members are not usually allowed latitude to do ANYTHING that the minister doesn't specifically authorize.

A Mushroom Environment

A membership that isn't kept aware of what is going on often refers to itself as living in a mushroom environment. Mushrooms are grown in the dark, planted on a bed of seasoned horse manure. This reaction on the part of members acknowledges their awareness of the "stuff" they are being fed while being kept in the dark about what is really going on. When matters do come to the surface, it is often countered by "official denials" and any who continue presenting the actual facts are labelled as "dissidents" or "gossips" and warned, if not dis-fellowshipped summarily. This too is the condition in a minister controlled organizational culture.

That environment promotes a membership that's completely unable to analyze and make practical decisions, on account of never having considered being engaged in such a responsibility. God's people are called-upon to "*speaking often to one another*",¹ but such activities are soundly discouraged. It seeks to maintain the ministry in full control, keeping the membership's interests subordinated. It leaves the minister in a position to say, "The truth is what I say it is!" "My way or the highway." What's a body to do?

A Calling Ignored

These kinds of organizations create a membership that is completely remiss in being "*pillars and grounds of the Truth*"² as is their mandate to do.

It fosters a membership that lives in (and often is content to live in) an environment where there's little to no opportunity for individual growth in faith, expression and useful accomplishment. All conversation is suppressed, at least where it might involve addressing abuses or ineptitude. Those meaningful inter-communications, such as

would create trust and interpersonal bonds are strongly discouraged. Thus, bonds don't form. And it is in this area where congregations can undermine themselves: In the area of affection and loyalty to one another. An interpersonal loyalty that does not have a minister in between one person and another! It is such a condition that, if employed, it would **bind congregations together** whenever negative political or doctrinal events stress the Church.

When ministers get crosswise with one another, the congregations should exhibit enough self-interest to ask that minister to "step aside" until he's spiritually reconciled with his peers, and re-dedicated to the health and welfare of the congregation over any other competing interests he may have. **The congregation should take the position that "we're not going to be divided". "We will evaluate the situation and make our own decision. We realize the greater importance of doing so as a body!"**

Where is the congregation that stands together as a body? Where is the congregation that loves one another sufficiently to say to a dissembling minister, "We choose to remain together. If there is a reason for us to change our affiliation, you need to make that case convincingly. Otherwise, you go do what you need to do, but **we're going to remain together.**" How many ministers would think and act more carefully knowing that "his" congregation wasn't going to allow themselves to become divided?

The burden should be put on the leaders to make their case, but it should be the right and obligation of the congregation to evaluate any reason for considering a posed change in affiliation and acting together once all the issues are resolved. Too much of the time, the thinking is done for them! It then becomes a matter of the minister working on those who are loyal to him. Most of the time, not all are 'with him'.

We see congregations repeatedly undermined and its unity **destroyed by ministers** who continually attempt to make the Nicolaitan condition work. God says He hates that approach, and He is not behind it. Having much

¹ Malachi 3:16-18

² 1st Timothy 3:15

Truth is one thing, but when your operational methods are counterproductive and offensive to God, what level of success should be expected?

It isn't just about Truth, it's also about the health and welfare of the flock. Abuse (over-lording) doesn't make for healthy congregations. Members who are afraid of their minister do not represent a catalyst for congregational integrity. Members whose first loyalty is to the organization and not to Christ and His Bride are usually too traumatized, when a disruption occurs, to be structural components of a solid purpose-oriented integral Church. And, what is its purpose if not unity first?

The prevailing presumption under a Nicolaitan mindset is that there must be a minister in full and exclusive control in order for a congregation or an organization to function or to endure. **It represents the minister as the major entity when, in fact, it's the Bride which is!** In practical fact, our experiences have been that "the ministry" has done more to inflict stress upon and break-up our congregations than they'd care to admit.

The problem isn't the fact of the existence of the ministry, but rather the way they have determined to operate. Too many see its purpose being a tool to uphold their prestige and personal prerogatives, when it should be to provide the training environment for all who are called of God for use in His Kingdom. The congregations should provide that environment for growth, not being an entity used by over-controlling men to keep the members under submission.

Integrity Expresses Love

But the major factor in the demise of viable congregations is the lack of integrity. By using the term "integrity", I'm not referring to ethical considerations so much, though those issues can be a factor. I'm referring to integrity in the sense of a congregation remaining **integral**, cohesive as a body, in the face of challenges. A structural integrity, in other words: Having a real concern, not only for one another, but for the welfare of the overall Body with concerns for itself remaining a dynamic entity.

This is a quality that unfortunately our congregations have lacked, big time. With the main focus being upon the administration of the congregation, (more clearly stated, the ministry), and even more than that, on the supreme leader, as though he and his employed ministers were the Church, congregations as a body were not properly oriented to one another as true brethren. There was no cohesiveness, there was no real love, at least not as it ought to exist. And maintaining the barriers to functional cohesiveness was the way so many ministers operated.

Love in the past has been defined first as loyalty to the minister, with our responses to one another based more on ones' perception of organizational loyalty than on a person's possession of God's Spirit and any jealousy a member might have for the health and welfare of the Body as a whole, distinct from its human leadership.

In fact, if a regular member exhibited a regard for fellow brethren that appeared to not reflect the utmost regard for the leadership, their careers in the Church were likely limited. Depending on the level of their insistence on Scriptural fidelity, and ministerial ethics, it could be doomed rather positively.

Lack of Self Esteem

When we stand back and consider the matter of congregational integrity, or the absence of it, we can often see many of the characteristics found in what is something like "the battered wife syndrome". When the individuals are denied their proper roles, with all decision-making and oversight being left in the hands of the minister, a condition is created that undermines normal relationships: Relationships that are needed for there to be any structural cohesiveness.

We don't tend to think of it that way, but it can develop. The individual mentality and the resulting collective mentality can leave a congregation effectively **without proper self-esteem**. It's what's known as the "whipped puppy syndrome", and that can dramatically affect the dynamism of the congregation. Members approach the minister, when they've

gathered-up the courage to do so, and effectively cower apologetically. While we are urged to come before the Throne of Grace with boldness,³ for some reason, many can't conjure up that same boldness when it comes to interacting with a man! One who is supposedly there to serve them! This situation should expose a problem.

The Bride, in that situation, effectively exhibits a serious character deficiency that no doubt is a disappointment to Christ.⁴ We have not produced cohesive congregations that are spiritually matured like they ought to be. They are over-submissive to their servers, with seemingly a lesser regard to their Lord and Master who called them and gave His life for them. That over-submissiveness is a form of worship, though few see it as such.

We must be attentive to who or what it is that we worship!

Under the prevailing culture within the Church, becoming weaned of that kind of minister worship is a hard step to take. We would rather stay in that original attitude and not take the courageous first steps toward developing self-confidence and proper self-respect. Especially when considering that this approach is regarded as "rebellion" by some. Well, if it is, is it a rebelliousness that is inappropriate? Who would the "good guys" have been in the Diotrephes situation? (3rd John 9-11) We weren't told, we were left to see the obvious for ourselves.

Strong Meat's Broader Benefit

Are we to become weaned of milk and take on strong meat? What is the condition that allows us to transition from being milk-bibbers to being able to digest meat, then even "strong meat"?

Does strong meat ever lead us to an exercising of our senses of discernment? Notice, it was in this very context that the Apostle Paul faulted the seasoned members in the Church. He found

³ Ephesians 3:11-12; Hebrews 4:16


⁴ Hebrews 10:38 "Now the just shall live by faith: but if any man draw back, my soul shall have no pleasure in him."

them still in need of milk, long after they should have graduated into that area of involvement⁵ where they considered matters and made appropriate, spiritually mature judgments.

Strong meat is not just an ineffective phenomenon, it is intended to produce a result. It was never intended that strong messages be heard but just for entertainment purposes. We can be fed strong meat and have it accumulate into fat, simply by lack of exercise, or we can ingest strong meat and have it make us stronger, not unlike the high protein diet that football players require for building strength and stamina. The difference accrues to our exercising our faculties, our spiritual senses of discernment. Are we to suppress those senses to our own detriment? Are we to act like "milquetoast" pillars our entire lives? What good is a "milquetoast" advocate for the Bride?

Those members OUGHT to have been exercising their senses of discernment, as Paul explains it. In no area is this more necessary than in matters relating to the health and welfare of the Bride. What good is it if no-one has the courage to jealously protect her from forces that would divide and could destroy her? What do we expect Christ's regard is toward those who are not as jealous for her well-being as He is?

"Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, That he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish." (Eph. 5:25-27)

If WE won't look after her interests, then who will? No-one was ever called to be just a 'ride-along' or only a passive spectator in the most important activity on Earth. 

⁵ Hebrews 5:12-14 "For when for the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need that one teach you again which be the first principles of the oracles of God; and are become such as have need of milk, and not of strong meat. For every one that useth milk is unskilful in the word of righteousness: for he is a babe. But **strong meat** belongeth to them that are of full age, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil."