



The Reflector

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“There Is One Hope”

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The driving force behind New Testament Christians was the one hope listed in Ephesians 4:4. In reading through the New Testament one gets the idea that they were striving to enter in at the strait gate. When they went out preaching the word their emphasis was on Christ as the giver of that hope – the looking forward to being in heaven with Him and being saved from the wrath to come. The reason for being who they were, and living as they did, was in order to inherit eternal life.

Occasionally, a self-perceived Super Christian comes along suggesting that we should have a higher motive for serving the Lord than such what's-in-it-for-me motivation. I even read one suggesting that such a motive reveals selfishness – that we should just “love the Lord” without regard to any personal reward that we may be getting in the end. Just love and serve Him for who He is. This is pure sanctified nonsense. John says of God that “We love Him, because He first loved us.” (1 John 4:19). So, are we to simply return His love for us without regard to any personal benefits we might receive from Him? Wrong. His love for us was manifest in His promising and providing the way for us to avoid eternal damnation and enjoy eternal life with Him in heaven. God made this quite clear from the beginning of the gospel. It is not selfish to love God for what He wants and has promised to do for us at the second coming of Christ. If God considers serving Him in order to go to heaven and avoid hell selfish, why did He use that hope as the primary motivation for being faithful to Him.

We fear that many “Christians” are no longer focused on that hope – hope of heaven and escaping hell – in their lives. They hold on to their “Christianity” all right enough, but their hope has changed from the heavenly hope to an earthly hope. “Christianity,” to them, is the means to bringing them into a better world order and happier life here – this is the hope they now see in Christ. There were some among Christians in Paul’s day who no longer believed they were going to be raised from death. Oh, they still believed in Christ and had a hope based on Him, but it was not the hope in Christ that they had been taught. Paul told them, in no uncertain terms, that a hope in Christ to be realized only in this world, made them most pitiable: “If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable.” (1 Corinthians 15:19). The one hope in which we are saved (cf. Romans 8:24) is hope for the world to come after this world is no more. It is not a hope based on a pipe dream or one coming out of a heart excited by the enticing words of a spell binder – it is a reasonable hope. It comes by reasoning from the scriptures and is passed on by the same process. It is a hope for which one can and is expected to give a reason (1 Peter 3:15). It is this hope that sustains us through life but is not realized until after earthly life is over.

It is so crucial that we hold on to that hope and not allow anything to take our focus off it. Yet, many do various ways. In this article, we are not speaking of those things that we generally warn against – “the cares of this world, and the

deceitfulness of riches, and the lusts of other things” (Mark 4:10) – that too often take our minds off the goal (hope). What we have in mind is 1) letting byproducts of striving for the goal become the goal itself and 2) allowing the means to the end overshadow the end itself. These result in a subtle, but real, shift in emphasis in our preaching/teaching and general lifestyle that can easily cause us to lose sight of what Christianity is really all about. It is about going to heaven and teaching others how to get there. But, you say, “Is not Jesus what it is all about?” Yes. But only in that He is the only way to heaven for us – He is our hope of glory (1 Timothy 1:1; Colossians 1:27). Unless He is the embodiment of the one hope of heaven for us, He is reduced to just a good wise man, teacher and philosopher from whom we can get pointers on how best get along in this world.

Some byproducts of the pursuit of this hope that benefit society are better and happier individuals, homes, workplaces, communities, schools, associations, institutions and other enhancements to life on earth. Experience has taught us that where “Christian principles” are applied they bring great improvements in the quality of life on earth and where they are missing there is a decline in the same quality of life. The more people in society who are truly looking for that blessed the better society becomes. So, as we see the benefits at work, it is easy to come to think that such improvements is what Christianity is all about. So the mind-set shifts from “the hope” of the Bible to the hope for a better society in which to live out our lives.

Modern “Christianity” having kind of lost sight of the one hope it once had has turned to one or more of its side effects. Our “preaching the word with its reproving, rebuking and exhorting with longsuffering and doctrine” with the view of preparing one for heaven has shifted to preaching that is aimed at giving one hope of a better life in the here and now. Once the goal has shifted from the original hope to the lesser byproduct hopes, it is just a matter of time that these lesser hopes dominates the thinking – so much so that other

sources are brought in and mixed with Bible teaching in order to feed the new-found hope. Then the church and preaching become secularized rather than spiritual. The social gospel has taken over.

There are also side effects to the pursuit of this hope that are not so pleasant – persecution, estranged families and broken friendships, and an assortment of other hardships. One can allow himself to so dwell on these that he sees them, in a warped sort of way, as evidence of his faithfulness to God. Thus, he develops a “persecution complex” and acts in such a way that compels fellow Christians to rebuke him sharply. He then sees this as evidence he must be right because after all they that “live godly in Christ suffer persecution.” Sometimes young Mormon missionaries tell us that they know their religion must be the right one because of the way they have been persecuted. It is true that all who live godly will be persecuted, but not all who are persecuted are living godly.

Allowing the means to reaching the goal of the hope before us to become the hope itself is a bit more tricky. The Bible teaches that a Christian is to live soberly, righteously and godly lives in the present world, but this kind of living is a means to an end – the hope set before us. Notice carefully the text: “Teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world; **Looking for that blessed hope**, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ;” (Titus 2:12-13 KJV). A good upright moral life is a wonderful thing. Without it we cannot reach that blessed hope. But with it we still may fall short of it.

A good Bible knowledge, defending the faith, and acts of worship are means to the end of reaching that blessed hope. I know of no one who would dispute that. Even here one needs to be careful that these means do not become the end of themselves. One can so focus on Bible knowledge that it becomes the goal of itself. It becomes more academic than spiritual. It may even gain one the reputation of being a “Bible scholar” believing that

is what Bible study is all about. Likewise, one can focus on “contending for the faith” until his defenses become exercises in outwitting the opposition and winning a debate. Rather than being a means to the end of bringing folks to a knowledge of the truth, so they can obey it truly looking for that blessed hope, it becomes much like a boxing match with folks judging who gets in the best licks. Again, as we use these means of receiving that hope, we need to be careful that the means do not become the end (hope) itself.

From the day that one comes to believe in the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus, proving him to be the Christ and obeys the form of that in baptism (Romans 6:3-4) his focus must be upon “the hope set before us” (Hebrews 6:18). May we not let anything destroy, diminish, or distract from that blessed hope. ■

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Is It Growth or Apostasy?

Cled E. Wallace

This is the story as it was told to me. A successful businessman and his wife were driving through the state. She observed and made some remarks about some nice meetinghouses under construction. Some of them were for the use of churches of Christ. She asked her husband why these people appeared to be enjoying a steady growth. His answer was that they are still exercising some evangelistic fervor but indicated that he thought they would get over it in time.

Religious movements display a large amount of zeal in their youth, press their claims with fervor and fight hard for recognition. They grow up, ardor cools and the original convictions that started them rolling are diluted. They become institutionalized and depend more on that than they do individual zeal and personal consecration. Popularity and respectability bring in large numbers of adherents who know little and care less about original principles and aims.

What individuals and congregations formerly took care of is now routine work for institutions who look after it for everybody. Individuals and

congregations toss in a little money, and it requires little sacrifice if the field has been thoroughly propagandized by a trained headquarters, boast about their institutions, relax and go to sleep with a good conscience. The emphasis is more and more on money and less and less on the strict standards of doctrinal conviction and personal devotion. People being what they are it is a comfortable feeling to make a comfortable contribution and let the institution do it. What is the result? The movement acquires definite denominational characteristics. The bigger and older it gets, the weaker it becomes in the things that really count. Doctrinal convictions and standards of conduct are diluted to meet the minimum requirements of the prevailing sentiment of an institutionalized constituency. Settling down to lower and lower levels is the inevitable tendency in this process of degeneration sometimes boasted of as growth.

The history of Christianity in its pure and corrupted forms offers some striking testimony to such developments. In the early church individuals and congregations continued in “the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship”. It was the time of “the simplicity that is in Christ”. Denominational organization with its inevitable institutional setup was unknown. The church grew, became popular, triumphed over persecution, conquered the government and became recognized. Organization broke out of the bonds of “the simplicity that is in Christ”. Progress was the order of the day. In a few centuries the church had a pope and a hierarchy.

The influence of it is still strong in religious movements that originally started in protest against such abuses. The process is gradual. One departure from original simplicity calls for another. What is taken for granted today would not have been tolerated a generation ago. It is growth or is it? John Wesley would not recognize the Methodist church of today with its highly organized modernism. Some of the sects which have broken away from it would more nearly harmonize with the ideals he zealously campaigned for.

Paul recognized the trends at work even while he was active and called it “the spirit of

lawlessness". The law was the gospel order which came by inspiration. It was the doctrine, organization, worship and manner of life revealed from heaven. "The spirit of lawlessness" was rebellion against the restraints of divine law, no doubt in the name of progress and growth. Many were ready to contend that the Lord's way could not triumph over the world. Something more impressive had to be employed.

Was the business man right? Will churches of Christ in time get over their evangelistic fervor and settle down on an institutional basis and respectably carry on in a denominational sort of way? It looks like we are on the way in spots. The Christian Church with its diluted doctrine, its emphasis on a social gospel and its general liberal attitude except in the despotism of its institutional organization has set us a good example once we drift away from simple and divine standards. We are already hearing about "What the church of Christ teaches", "our papers", "our schools", "our orphan homes", "our institutions" and other denominational terms which clearly indicate that some of us do not know what the church of the New Testament is.

Denominational language is a sure symptom of denominational thinking and if widespread enough will eventually lead to a denominational setup. Sure, a warning along this line will bring sneers and mockery from many just as it did a generation or so ago when the digressive movement started.

What, if anything, can be done about it? Form an organization to combat trends hostile to and leading away from the ancient order of things? The only remedy there is will be overlooked and spurned by the institutionally minded. It is too simple. It means "contending for the faith once for all delivered to the saints", "holding the pattern of sound words" found in the New Testament, "guarding that which is committed unto thee," faith in God and suspicion of everything in religion of a purely human origin. What is the New Testament and what does it teach will have to be the consideration. Every step in the right direction and every protest against trends and worse will have to

be made within the framework of the New Testament order.

The church in its widest usage includes all the children of God, all who have obeyed the gospel, baptized believers in Christ. Any use of the word church, which is smaller than this and larger than a local congregation is unscriptural and therefore misleading, unless it is properly qualified by some geographical term, such as "the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria." There is the church or congregation in or at a certain place which is independent of any jurisdiction except the law of the Lord revealed in the New Testament. With its elders and deacons, it is the nearest approach to institutionalism you can find in the New Testament. Individual disciples are the units which spark the whole movement. A knowledge of, and loyalty to the teaching of the New Testament on the part of all who care anything about it is the "sine qua non" of the whole situation. The right kind of preaching and teaching and plenty of it will keep us on the track and spare a wreck. ■

Of Religious Divisions ...

It is amazing how many people think that all religious divisions can be cured by more love and "better attitudes." These assume that hatred and bad attitudes must have caused the divisions in the first place. This may have been in some cases, but not in most cases. In more cases than not, the difference is doctrinal leading to differences of faith and practice.

Recognizing the cause of the differences governs one's approach to solving the problem. Those who see it mostly as love and attitude problem often urge us to ignore doctrine and let's meet and work together united on our love for each other. They see doctrine as not being an obstacle if we all have a loving attitude. They look for ways to minimize doctrinal differences to the point of insignificance. Love is everything to these people. Over 30 years ago I heard a brother pray, "Lord, we thank you for love. *We know that love is more important than being right.*" ■