

## THE ADDED THINGS

*"...and (Hezekiah) brake in pieces the brasen serpent that Moses had made: for unto those days the children of Israel did burn incense to it: and he called it Nehushtan" II Kings 18:4*

In the eyes of many, the church bears little resemblance to that of early Christianity. Perhaps this is because man has added so many of his own ideas, inventions and theology to what God initiated in the beginning. All this, no doubt, has been done with the best of intentions. Man has simply been trying to help God. The unfortunate result of so much help is that the church has become full of many outward things. Many things have been added by man which have very little to do with God's plan or His purpose. Sadly, some of these things have actually become a hindrance to what God is doing and what He wants to do with His people. They have become a stumbling block to many and a detriment to those who want to have a living church experience.

There are many things which man has added to the church, but among them one of the deadliest is that of human organization. Please don't misunderstand me. I am not against organization. Almost everyone must realize that God can lead His people to organize certain works for Him in order to accomplish His purposes. Yet an organization can be dangerous because it seems to take on a life of its own. An organization may be initiated by the Holy Spirit working through men, but continue and perpetrate itself long after the presence of God has departed.

The natural man seems to reverence and give much weight to the way things have been done in the past. The "old" way of doing things seems very safe and secure. However, as we have been seeing, this attitude directly contradicts the principle of the body. This principle is that the Holy Spirit will lead each of His members daily into the works which He would have them to do. Organizations to accomplish the work of God are fine as long as the Holy Spirit has complete authority in them. The men who are involved in these organizations and who bear some responsibility in them, must be open to the Holy Spirit. He must be able to change the way they are operating or even disband them entirely. Jesus Christ has to be the Lord and the head of all that they are doing. Unfortunately, it is far too easy for men to shift their gaze from God to an earthly arrangement of how things should be accomplished.

Many worship services today fit very well into this category. Most of them are pre-planned, perhaps weeks in advance. Often there is very little room, if any, for the Holy Spirit to lead the different activities in these meetings. He is relegated to fitting Himself in wherever He can, rather than having the opportunity to be the author of everything.

The work of the church in many places is also highly structured and organized. Usually it has been that way for many years, and very often does not seem likely to change in the near future. Here again we see men permitting God to work only in the way which they have perceived Him for a long time, and having very little opening for the Holy Spirit to do new, living things in their midst. The end result of this situation is a religion which has a form of godliness—but very little content of reality. Although this is an unfortunate circumstance, it is exactly what the Bible says will be happening in the latter days (II Tim 3:5).

Nevertheless, I believe God desires something more from His people than a mere shell of religion. His desire is that the members of His body would be moved and prompted by His leading, and in this way would express Him to the people with whom they would come into contact. The church is Christ's living body. It is His expression on the earth today. Just as Jesus Christ expressed God fully when He was on the earth, so today the church is to express Jesus Christ so that people will know of God's reality.

Time and space would fail us if we were to enumerate all the religious externalities which have been added to the church of God. However, it seems expedient to mention a few of the more prominent ones in order to make the point more clear. Let us consider for a moment. Where do we find choirs in the New Testament? Where do we find the clergy-laity system? Where are the vestments or robes which some "ministers" wear? And where do we find stained glass windows, "altars" or ornate cathedrals? All these things have been added by man to New Testament Christianity because they are things which are meaningful to human beings. They give some men a natural feeling of awe or perhaps make them "feel" closer to God. Many Christians might be surprised to discover that all this is of absolutely no value in genuine spiritual worship to God. There are no special times, places or props necessary for true worship. God is as real and available in a jail cell as in a pew.

The problem with religious externalities is not that they exist, but that by their existence they become something which they should not be. Men begin to attach certain meanings to these things which in turn become a substitute for spiritual reality. These things fill a place in men's hearts which needs to be filled by God alone. Religious externalities may capture our attention and affection, which belong to the Lord alone. Substitution of this nature is accomplished in a very subtle way. When man begins to seek after God, he also seeks understanding for many Biblical expressions and ideas—among which may be the concept of "church," the cross, ministry or worship. If, while he is seeking, his mind is supplied with answers which have no spiritual reality, he may become thereby satisfied. Thus, his search does not continue until he finds the truth. Herein lies the great danger of outward "religious" things. They provide a definition for man of spiritual things, yet without any content. The seeker is then left not knowing that there is anything deeper for them to understand.

So it is with the word "church." When Christians come to know the church only as a building which houses a specific religious organization, perhaps with several pastors and a secretary, their minds may be satisfied. Many of them may never seek to know the spiritual reality of the church. Being blinded in this way, they may find their church experience unsatisfying. When this happens many Christians begin to seek fulfillment outside of Jesus Christ. Their jobs, their families and many other things begin to take their time and attention. The end result of their misdirection is of great loss to them personally and to the body of Christ corporately. I believe that, at least to some degree, this is part of Satan's strategy. If he can promote definitions for scriptural concepts which have little or no real meaning, then he has succeeded in keeping many

from a deeper walk with Christ.

It seems appropriate here to spend some time to examine one of these many extra-Biblical things which have become so harmful to the body. This is the problem of the clergy-laity system which is so prominent among us today. As far as I know, in the New Testament, there is only one thing which Jesus Christ says that He hates. This thing is mentioned in Revelation in the letters to the seven churches. It is the deeds and the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, mentioned in Revelation 2:6,15. Since church history does not record any group of people called "the Nicolaitans" specifically, there has been much speculation about them. I believe the answer to their identity lies in the meaning of the word "Nicolaitan." Please bear with me as we investigate this possibility.

It is my understanding that the word "NIKAO" in the original Greek language means to conquer, to subdue or to rise above: while the word "LAOS" (from which we derive the word "laity") means the "people at large" or the "people assembled"\* Therefore, the word "Nicolaitan," which is composed of these two words, would mean those who rise above and subdue the laity or the common people. How this parallels the clergy-laity system which we have today.

From our previous discussions, it is easy to understand why Jesus Christ would detest this kind of a thing. Such an arrangement stifles and hinders the functioning of His body, which is His expression on the earth. The immediate effect of it is that most members of the church are kept largely inactive and a select group of men is elevated to a position of having to do most everything. So we have a few men trying to live the church life for the many. Obviously this is not possible; and it greatly hinders God's work.

In the New Testament, there is no special man or group of men who has any greater access to God than the rest of the members. In the Old Testament, the Levites performed this function. But in the New Testament, there is no special priesthood. We are all to be a kingdom of priests to God (Rev 1:6). This means that each member of Christ's body has equal access to the throne of God. We can all enter into the Holiest of Holies and each one of us can appear before God, being washed in the blood of the Lamb. No one is to be left out. This means that we do not need an elite group of men to perform most of the functions of the church for

\*Vine's "Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words."

us or to be the sole source of teaching which we receive.

Admittedly, there are specially gifted and appointed men in the New Testament. These ministers—the apostles, prophets, pastors, teachers, and evangelists—are gifts given by God to His body. Yet these men are not to supersede or take over the functioning of the body of Christ. All the work of the ministers must be kept within this perspective. Their job is not to "run the church." They are not to become so prominent that all the members of the body cannot freely perform their part in expressing Jesus Christ. This not only includes the daily church life but also the meetings as well.

It is worth noting that there are three nouns in the Greek language which are translated "minister" in the New Testament. 1. "DIAKONOS" means a servant, attendant, or minister. This is the same word which is translated "deacon" in other places. 2. "LEITOURGOS" "Denoted among the Greeks, firstly, one who discharged a public office at his own expense, then, in general, a public servant, minister." 3. "HUPERETES" "Properly an under rower, as distinguished from a seaman, hence came to denote any subordinate acting under another's direction." VINE Nothing in this word "minister" denotes a hierarchy of special Christians which directs the activities of the church. The emphasis in the meaning is on being a servant. The word "office" (I Tim

3:10,13 KJV), referring to deacons, represents no word in the original, but was added by the translators. "Minister" is a translation of the word "DIAKONOS" while "deacon" is a transliteration of the same word. Both words have the same meaning, and perhaps should have been translated consistently as the same word to avoid confusion.

So we have seen that today the church situation is quite a bit different from that which God originally intended. Much of what has originated solely from man has corrupted our church experience. What we as Christians need to do therefore is to repent of these things and turn back from them to what God initially desired. Let us only be His living body, His true expression on the earth. Let us flee from religious externalities that keep us from the reality of the living presence of God in our daily lives and in our worship. Let us not cling to empty forms without substance, but seek God while He may be found. How we desperately need His reality in our Christianity!