

Spiritual Maturity – God’s Part and Ours

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We are living in a time, a season, a fresh, new dimension of the church today. It is vital that we in the church awaken to become more effective. It is too late to just “play church.” God has provided all we need to be properly prepared for His next move. It is up to us, as individuals, to embrace and apply what He’s taught us from His Word. The Old Testament is full of commands to “obey” and “keep,” referring to His laws, precepts, and commandments. We are there again in time, and must learn to walk in pure obedience to all He has set before us. Learning to discern is vitally important. We must be able to discern His voice, His ways, and His timing. When the church begins to truly function according to His will, becoming more alive to the heart of God, we will become powerful, productive, and effective. The enemy fears that in the church and fights it.

May we recognize that in God’s mind and by His divine plan, the *universal church* is comprised of every true believer regardless of socio-economic status, cultural or national heritage, the denomination of the church they attend, or the level of their zeal for Him. All who come in the name of Jesus Christ, worldwide, are a part of the “church.”

There is a further fact we can notice. Resident within the larger body of the church, there is what I call “the church within the church.” We could call it “the Bride.” Or, in years gone by, it was labeled “the manifest sons of God.” God has always dealt with a “remnant,” that group that stands out in commitment, fervency, purity, holy living, and obedience to the ways of God. They not only *love* God, they are *in love* with Him. It is the “church within the church” that hungers and thirsts for the next move of God on the earth. It serves as a forerunner, one who goes ahead and says, “Prepare ye the way” (John1:23). It is the body of believers that hears the voice of the Spirit of God and quickly responds, coming ahead of His next move with revelation and power, authority and ability.

Today, we entertain the same questions previous generations asked: “God, what’s next? Is there more than this?” His answer in the past was, “Yes,” and then He poured out His Spirit in a mighty move, a mighty revelation of His power. His purpose was to build unity in the family of God, to bring a oneness into the church (Gal.3:26-28; 1Cor.12:12,13). That purpose has not changed over time; it is the same today.

There was the revival called Pentecost in the early 20th century. Then, in the 1960’s and ‘70’s, it was the Charismatic Renewal when God poured out His Spirit in the mainline Protestant denominations, the Roman Catholic Church, among the Jews, and Hippies. People were hungry to experience God in all His fullness. Thousands were brought into His Kingdom through salvation, and then baptized in His Holy Spirit. It was an exciting time in the church.

At times like that, when hearts are open to the supernatural, there is a dangerous position that arises. Satan loves to counterfeit the real. He designs this “fake” to be both enchanting and desirable, but also repulsive in its extremes and abuses. When God’s people demand from God what He is not giving at that time, a spirit of deception gains entrance into the Christian arena offering to give us whatever we are asking for. Because the people are so desirous of something dramatically *more* from God, the enemy can too easily dupe them into following after a counterfeit – a lie – some “teaching” that is not from God at all, or perhaps pushes a teaching to an errant extreme. The lie often is presented as a new truth, a new revelation, or something wonderful but not understood before. That, in itself, should be a caution light flashing in our eyes, for Solomon told us there was “nothing new under the sun” (Eccl.1:9,10).

Paul repeatedly warns us to be discerning concerning false doctrine and false teachers (Eph.4:14; Col.2:4,8; Rom.16:18b; 1Thes.5:21; Phil.4:8). God knew we could easily be swayed by deceitful means so He addressed that in several different contexts of the New Testament in addition to Paul’s writings (Heb.13:9a; 2Pet.2:1,2; 1Jn.4:1). Unfortunately, God’s written warning against this danger went

unheeded and came to pass during and following the Charismatic Renewal. We the church, designed by God to be one and walking in unity, ended up with new denominations, greater division over biblical interpretation, and even a few cults – groups that strayed so far from God’s absolutes so as not to be “Christian” at all.

We are even living out another situation Paul addressed and condemned in the Corinthian church (1Cor.1:9-13). Then, contention arose among believers because they were picking and choosing which leader they wanted to follow, and seemed to set up a form of competition between them (“I am of Paul; and I of Apollos; and I of Cephas; and I of Christ” v.12). Much the same thing happened in the Charismatic move and continues today to a certain extent.

As in previous generations and past moves of God, in the ‘70’s the people arose to a certain level of spiritual maturity and stopped right there. They claimed, “This is that...,” referring to some prophetic scripture, and it became the status quo. The church moved into a good level with God, but, by and large, there was no continuing pursuit for more or greater revelation. We became too satisfied with what we now had in Him. Do you really think that was all God had in mind?

Observers became wary of the “move of God” because the church never actually moved into His complete plan but stopped short of the power in unity. We talked about His outpouring of power and authority, but failed to move into it. We then loathed the *counterfeit* with its division, competition, and lack of unity and almost stepped into an avoidance mode. The enemy’s plot succeeds because when God’s *real* comes along later, we do not discern its divine authenticity and miss it altogether. We fear being deceived again, so we reject the prophetic, the healing ministries, and the move of His Spirit in the miraculous. We just miss it, and Him.

The next move of God is not going to come as *man* orchestrates or plans it. It will not come through big or recognized names of ministers or para-church organizations. It will come through local churches into the universal church. It will come through the “regular” people in the pews who hunger for all God has to offer. Something that will hinder us in this next move of God is being locked into church (denominational) tradition – preconceived ideas, judgments, and precepts passed on from generation to generation. We can remember, even honor, what was set in the past, but it is sin to venerate traditions and not move on in accordance with what God is doing today to develop the whole church.

Consider this simplistic definition of ***spiritual maturity: it is the discovery and acceptance of that portion that is God’s only, and that portion which is ours only.*** With this as a standard we must be willing to relinquish all of our great ideas with their human origins and reasoning. God will answer the “What’s next?” “When will it happen?” and “How will it be?” questions only when He begins to pour out His Spirit anew to freshen His church. And when He does, it will feel like a “suddenly of God” even though we have been asking and watching for it for some time.

We are in an interim period at this time – between moves, between demonstrations, between outpourings from God. Now is a good time to take personal inventory. Jesus Himself said it was important to “count the cost” before entering into any venture, let alone following Him in discipleship (Lk.14:25-33). I believe we are hearing from God today something like this: “You’ve *said* a lot of things about being faithful to Me and *doing* according to My will. Now, it’s time to live your whole life as you have spoken.”

Church, we must rise to a higher level with God. We have enjoyed where we are long enough – long enough to be comfortable without being challenged to grow further. We say we are thirsty for more of God, but are we simply desirous of His blessings, or do we truly want Him for Who He is? The Psalmist says his heart (soul) is so thirsty “for God, for the living God,” that it’s as if he was a deer longing for a life-giving drink of water (Ps.42:1,2). In Psalm 63, David says, “O God, thou art my God; early will I seek thee: my soul thirsteth for thee, my flesh longeth for thee in a dry and thirsty land, where no water

is” (v.1). Have we come to that kind of thirst for Him? Do we long for Him to satisfy our desires more than any other thing? Are we willing to pay the price whatever that might be?

Earlier, we said that spiritual maturity reflects our understanding of what is God’s part in revival, and what is our part. For our purposes here, we will look at only two things we are responsible for as we prepare for more of God’s outpouring: *congregating* and *constancy*.

1) Congregating

In Psalm 84, the Psalmist reveals this need and longing to be in the House of the Lord with God’s people. David likewise wrote, in Psalm 27, verse 4, “One thing have I desired of the Lord, that will I seek after, that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to inquire in his temple.” This whole Psalm is magnificent and worth the reading. Here, however, we are looking at the sincerity and depth in David’s longing to be back in the congregation, forever beholding the incredible beauty of God. We have lost that as a deep desire today.

We have taken control of church attendance, picking and choosing when and where we will attend, led mostly by our *feelings*. We even seem to think we can select the scriptures we like and can live with comfortably, and “get by” applying only these in our every-day lives. For instance, if we have been hurt in the church, or if we are critical of the methodology of a certain church, and choose to worship at home alone, we tend to ignore or discard verses like Hebrews 10:25 – “Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching.”

This verse shows us that the closer we come to the return of the Lord, the more we will need the supportive and nurturing atmosphere of the family of God – the church. By implication, that demands the church to become a safe place, a place where we want to be because the experience is so rewarding. Unfortunately, many have been hurt in the church, but let us note that the hurt comes from humans in the church, not from God’s plan of what the church is to be. We need to become the family of God as He designed it.

God is looking for a people who know how to prioritize their lives and their thinking. When we come together in the assembly (or congregation), there is a purely human tendency to participate mindlessly. Our minds are on something else, or so involved with our own things in the service to make it fun, we are too busy to even notice Him. We need to learn to be aware of His presence and *His* desires for directing the service.

Let’s remember, when we are talking about “commitment,” God is concerned about our level of commitment to Him. We err when we attempt to get the people of any given congregation to commit to a pastor or leader or any human being, or even to the church organization. That has never been God’s focus. Our commitment is to be to God Himself.

Congregating. Why do we gather together in the assembly?

1) To know and enjoy the presence of our God. Since the Holy Spirit is resident in every believer, we take Him with us wherever we go. Awesome thought. And it could be a corrective thought, serving to remind us of where we ought not to go because we would expose Him to the same questionable environment.

Congregating. The more of us there are together in one place at one time, the greater the revelation of God. When we come together, we can see gathering as an opportunity to bring and share the gifts God has set in individuals, and therefore add to the building up of the whole Body of Christ, the church. Paul says, “...when ye come together, every one of you hath a psalm, hath a doctrine, hath a

tongue, hath a revelation, hath an interpretation...” (1Cor.14:26). If we are looking for and discerning God’s presence, we also will be led by His Spirit as we share our various gifts.

2) That is where *fellowship* is, or happens. God created us for fellowship – with Himself and with others. In John’s first epistle, he said one reason for his writing was “that ye also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ” (1John1:3). Further, John mentioned he was writing “that your joy may be full” (v.4). We need fellowship to be complete, therefore we need one another.

When we picture what fellowship is, let’s understand that *real* fellowship is not in the church picnics or games played. Those activities give us a focal point for coming together at times, but real fellowship is in the sharing, or drinking of one another’s spirit. Fellowship can be as simple as being greeted at the door. That warms us inside, even if we are reluctant to admit it. We also enjoy fellowship as we share the love of God in the pews. These things all touch our human emotions and further prepare us to sing to Him: “Majesty. Worship His majesty.”

3) There is to be *protection in the Body of Christ*. This is something we often miss. The church should be a place of safety. Unfortunately, *people* use, misuse, and abuse the scriptures rather than apply them for the edifying and building up of the church. We get our “gospel guns” loaded and fling verses at others like bullets. “The Bible says...” And we blast them when we think they need direction or correction. It has never been God’s plan to wound His children into obedience or compliance. His way is love and grace and mercy, always drawing us to Himself even when He is correcting the course.

Difficult people will exist in *your* church. God’s objective is to mold, correct, and chasten His people when they stray or err in the Christian walk. He knows all about each one of us: what we need to deal with, and how and when and under what corrective circumstances those dealings will be effective. Consider this truth: God brings these difficult people to church, your church, a place where people are supposed to love one another enough to hold up the difficult ones while He fixes them. If we attempt to do His work in correction of others, He cannot accomplish His divine plan in their lives (or ours). Our chastening rarely works “the peaceable fruit of righteousness” (Heb.12:11), but when we do *our* part (be supportive and intercede), God can work with these others from the inside out. In that way, He will bring about the external changes that need to be accomplished. They will be a wonderful by-product of His deeper work.

God is able to go after the root of problems when He has a church mature enough to strengthen and encourage these persons while they are going through God’s dealings. The core problem-area that God is after is usually a well-hidden sin that must be confessed so forgiveness can occur. It may take some time for the persons to recognize and admit to the problem before they can proceed with God. And it may be a difficult time for them in the process. Often, they need the loving support of brothers and sisters in the Lord to help carry their load (Gal.6:2; Rom.15:1; 1Thes.5:14).

We have not been called to sit in judgment over one another, no matter how far short a person falls from God’s standards (Mt.7:1-5; 1Cor.4:4b,5; Jas.4:11). God has not set us in churches to straighten out the church, its leadership, or individuals within that Body. He wants us to be supportive of our brothers and sisters in Christ, a strength to or for others to draw from in hard times, a safe-house, if you will. He wants to be able to trust us to be that while He deals with His people. We are a family, God’s family. And as in natural families, siblings may have differences that need to be worked out. But when someone from the “outside” comes along and attacks a family member, the whole family comes to the fore. It *should* be like that in the Body of Christ. We should be offering one another protection when that is needed, not condemnation. And we can only do that through the Father’s love operating in and through us, for “love covereth a multitude of sins” (1Pet.4:8).

Congregating in the Body of Christ is mainly for being where He is, in His awesome presence, then for fellowship and a place of protection. There is a fourth reason for gathering together in the congregation.

4) The local church is where ministry is directed, or under supervision. There has been a growing *phobia* in the church over control issues. We have a fear of “being controlled.” Too often we hear, “They’re trying to control me!” The enemy loves that! Remember, earlier we said that Satan uses counterfeits of God’s *real* to gain his own type of victories. This is a particularly devious and successful tactic. If the enemy can get to us first with a demonstration of the unreal, his repulsive counterfeit, we become so afraid of the real, by the time it comes we discredit it, fearing it may also not be of God.

We need to not worry about these counterfeits, these stretches of the truth, these extremes. *We need to be extreme about the sovereignty of God.* Jesus said, “It’s My church. *I’m* going to build it, and the gates of hell may try, but they will not be successful – they shall not prevail against My church!” (Mt.16:18). We don’t have to build the church. We simply have to be pillars, placed and strengthened by God’s Holy Spirit.

Ministry must be directed. Those of us who minister (and we all do) must not get away from strict adherence to the ways and teachings of God. If we get off doing our own little thing without being submitted and accountable to someone or some governing board, we become prey to every diversion of truth that exists. Protection within the Body of Christ is for you as an individual first, and then for your ministry. Submission to authority is for your protection.

Ministry. There are many kinds of real ministry besides speaking from a platform. We simply need to be open to hear God’s direction. He will have a way of moving you into *His* chosen place of usefulness, but it may not fit your own interpretation of the original vision – what you thought He had in mind when you first heard His call. Be open to God. Allow Him to work into you all He knows you will need later, and all that will glorify Him – now and then.

Whatever you are doing, do it with all your heart (Col.3:17,23; Eph.6:6,7; 1Cor.10:31) and allow the anointing of God in your life to come forth, taking it wherever He wants it to be manifested. Whatever you are doing: dusting the pews, mowing the lawn, cleaning the kitchen or toilets, all the while you are working, pray for the people in the church. Don’t sit back and wait for an official appointment of “ministry.” Be available to do whatever needs to be done. If you think you have been called by God for something more “spiritual” and you think you are ready to take on the world because He called, you’re probably not ready yet. If you are humbly aware of your personal inadequacies and just want to be available to God to bring Him glory however He directs – you’re ready. One way to evaluate where you are in this is to answer a simple question. Do you want to be useful, or important?

God directs through the church. That is His plan and design. It is through the church that ministry is directed. Simply make yourself available to do whatever is not being done at the moment and allow God the freedom to move you daily into the place He wants.

2) Constancy.

We want to consider the word “dwell” when we think of *constancy* in the Body of Christ. We find the word in Psalm 84:4, “Blessed are they who dwell in thy house.” And, again in Psalm 91, all that we read there is based on our *dwelling* in the right place (“He that dwelleth in the secret place of the most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty.” Ps.91:1).

Today we are not so concerned with *constancy* – we want “instancy.” Instant everything. God is looking for people who breathe in and out and who live by the scriptures: “Let everything that hath breath praise the Lord” (Ps.150:6). “Let the words of my mouth...be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord” (Ps.19:14). He wants to hear from each of His called ones, “God, I will walk in *constancy* in all areas of my life.”

According to the American Heritage Dictionary (1981), *constancy* means “steadfastness in purpose, or loyalty: faithfulness; unchanging quality or state.” Faithfulness. Unchanging. Loyal. We’re not used to that today, even in the church. Our western culture is ruled by an egocentric philosophy that encourages us to “look out for old #1,” meaning ourselves. We hear, “If it *feels* right...” Our emotions control us, both positively and negatively. That is not God’s way. He highly regards faithfulness in obedience and *constancy* in everything.

For example, we are to praise God constantly (Ps.34:1) because He is God. When we praise Him in spite of our negative feelings, the enemy is quick to charge, “Hypocrite!” On the contrary, that’s not hypocrisy, it’s obedience! Our God is always worthy of our praise! We should not be surprised by Satan’s accusations, for he is called “the accuser of our brethren” (Rev.12:10). Know this: not only does he accuse you before God and to other people; he also accuses you (and your shortfalls) to *you*, attempting to stop your forward progress with God by discouraging you.

We have discussed God’s plan for His church to come together in the congregation, and the benefits we receive when we are faithful in the *congregating*. Too often, we limit our understanding of church attendance as purely a place where we can have our spiritual needs met. We too often see the Sunday service as a sort of filling station. Let’s look from another perspective – we are a kingdom of priests (Ex.19:6; 1Pet.2:5,9), that is, servants, and we come together to *give*, or minister to the others. That does not necessarily mean to preach, but to smile, or nod in agreement, or compliment another, or touch, or give a compassionate look, or whatever. Come to bless others. But, be faithful in coming as well as in praise. We can praise God anywhere and any time, but we can function as a giving, ministering member of the Body of Christ only when we are there in the church. *Constancy*.

Another area where we need *constancy* is in *meditation*. We quoted Psalm 19:14 above but omitted a phrase for that context. The whole verse reads, “Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord.” Meditation has to do with thinking about something solemnly, reflecting on it. It is a re-visitation of a thought to consider it more fully. The Psalmist’s request is that the thoughts and ideas that flood his mind would be pleasing to God, always. In other words, “Lord, I don’t want my thoughts and contemplations to be contrary to anything that is of You. Not only the words that come from my mouth, Lord, but my hidden thoughts as well – may they all please You.”

Paul gives us a number of qualifiers for what we are to think about. In Philippians 4:8 he says to think on these things: “whatsoever things are true...honest...just...pure...lovely... and of good report.” We must learn to think like Jesus, pondering the ways of the Lord. What good things has God done for you? Meditate on those. What has He done for others? He’ll do that for you. Think about that.

Let’s not allow the enemy to distract us by focusing on our circumstances. He will try to use the temporary as evidence in his arguments with us. The Word of the Lord never changes. Never. What He said in the past He intends to fulfill – every promise, every prophetic word. Our prayer should be, “Lord, teach me Your ways more perfectly so I may keep the conditions of Your promises. Then Lord, in Your time...”

When we consider these times in which we are living, it ought to drive us into the arms of the Lord with great fervency. He is our Strong Tower. Indeed, we live in perilous times. God knows that, and knew it when He caused the scriptures to be written down for us. He knows what we need for strength, and courage, and success. We have looked at why He called us to exist in one Body of Christ, coming together to meet in the assembly. And we have discussed His requirement for us to display constancy in our walk with Him. We may not always understand His methods or want to follow His instructions because they go against our *human* nature. That just may be the point. God created us and knows what it takes for us to be happily fulfilled and joyfully successful in this life. When you read, “I am the Lord” in the scriptures, it will help if you add these words to clarify: “I am the Lord – and you are not!”