

Is the Church Losing Her Identity?

Written by Jimmy Lane

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For quite some time we have been witnessing a trend within the brotherhood that over the years has been leading many of God's people, and as a consequence more and more entire congregations, in a direction that is taking them farther away from, rather than closer to, the principles upon which the Church of Christ was originally established. In retrospect we must admit that during our lifetime, the old "Ship of Zion" has certainly sailed through some troubled waters. It has always amazed me though that the very things that seem to cause some to drift away from what is true and right often are the very same things that cause others to redouble their efforts in drawing closer to what we know to be Bible based Christianity.

This phenomenon is often manifested in the various types of natural disasters that occur in the world, as was recently witnessed in all the looting and pillaging that took place in the aftermath of hurricanes Katrina and Rita. Right smack in the middle of the tremendous outpouring of sympathy and concern which motivated most Americans to open their hearts and even their pocketbooks to those in need, others, taking advantage of the lack of security, started ransacking homes and businesses. And according to the headlines on my desk this very day, it is again taking place in Pakistan after the terrible earthquake. It seems to be true: what brings out the best in some people only serves to bring out the worst in others.

But why must the church fall victim to this tragedy? Just because a few start looking for loopholes through which they can crawl into a more permissive and tolerant mindset, must the church allow such a trend to continue and even prosper? It is indeed a sad commentary on the church of today when its members are not even recognized for being who they are supposed to be—the bride of Christ! When was the last time one of our Godly sisters with her modest dress and long hair was stopped in the shopping mall and asked if she was a member of the Church of Christ? Has it ever happened that way? Instead, the comment usually runs along the line: "Oh, you must be Pentecostal." To me, that's a shame. And I don't say that as a reflection in any way upon our Godly sisters—it's not their fault. It just seems such a shame that the Church of Christ all too often has to play "second fiddle" to churches that in almost every other area bear no resemblance whatsoever to the church of the Bible.

I fully realize a lot of this is due in large part to the "successes" of our digressive brethren, who it seems have actively made the transition into the ranks of denominationalism. Take away their name and they are more and more resembling just another denomination down

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the street. It's much the same scenario as portrayed by ancient Israel according to the prophet Isaiah in Isa. 4:1, "And in that day seven women shall take hold of one man, saying We will eat our own bread, and wear our own apparel: only let us be called by thy name, to take away our reproach." Apparently they felt that as long as the name was in place, that's all that mattered. So it seems to be with many if not most of the modern day so-called "Churches of Christ."

And I do understand this is not our fault. But what alarms me is this: what we see taking place on such a grand scale among the digressive churches of Christ we also see taking place among our own ranks. It's just that the problem may not seem to be as great among us for the simple reason we don't have the numbers they have. But the problem exists nonetheless. Brethren, are we losing our identity? And when I say "we," I certainly am not including every single member, nor am I including every single congregation. But I am speaking about "we" as a brotherhood. There may be only one "bad apple" in a family, but so often that one family member casts a negative reflection on the family name. This can also happen in and among the family of God. There may be only one "bad apple" so to speak in an entire congregation; but simply because it is there, the entire congregation can get a black eye. Cannot this same thing take place within a brotherhood?

I firmly believe that in some cases the church is indeed suffering from a severe case of "lost identity." And I don't mean to sound negative, nor do I wish to become an alarmist. In fact, I would much rather be an optimist than a pessimist. But when a threat begins to manifest itself, and even begins to prosper and advance, I DO feel we need to sound an alarm. Brethren, are we on a course that leads to becoming the Church of Christ in NAME ONLY?

I would point out several areas of definite concern. First of all, what about doctrine? Bro. Steve Watts wrote an excellent piece in the August issue of this journal concerning this very subject, and I feel we would be wise in giving what he said careful consideration. But there seems to be a feeling among some brethren that "doctrine" is just not that important anymore—at least in terms of the doctrines for which we have always stood. The trend is to be more permissive, to be more tolerant of others who may not believe as we do. If doctrine was not that important, why then did Paul admonish Timothy in 1 Tim. 4:16, 'Take heed unto thyself, and unto the doctrine; continue in them"? Why was Paul lamenting the future of the church when he said in 2 Tim.4:3, "For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine"? If doctrine didn't really matter, why would he warn Titus in Titus 2:7 "in

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doctrine shewing uncorruptness...'? The truth is, matters of doctrine were SO important in Paul's mind, he commanded the church at Rome to "mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them " (Rom. 16:17). Can you think of any other area which could cause an "identity crisis"; any more than false doctrine? Need I say more on this subject?

Another area affecting the church's identity concerns the sanctity of the marriage bond. We have long stood against divorce and remarriage for ANY reason, and I firmly believe that stand to be Biblically based, and therefore to be sound doctrine. There may be other churches in the world which maintain a similar stand, but for the most part, it seems we have stood as a lone sentinel in proclaiming "one man, one woman, for life."; That being the case; where then should divorce even enter the picture? But alas, as one brother recently pointed out, although we may not be a brother-hood of divorce and remarriage, we are fast becoming a brotherhood of divorce! Shame on US! What a blow to our identity! What has happened to the sanctity of marriage? We KNOW what has happened out in the world—must we allow the same thing to take place in the church?

According to Paul in Ephesians 5, the relationship existing between a husband and wife is a very close parallel to the relationship existing between Christ and the church. What would be our reaction if Christ placed as little significance on his relationship to US, as husbands and wives so often do to one another today? It seems to me that we as a brotherhood need to get a handle on this problem and start reining this thing in before it becomes a runaway, completely out of control.

Perhaps a good starting point would be to denounce divorce for the sin that it IS, and then to start reinforcing the Biblical truth in all our congregations, and especially among our young people, that "till death do we part"; means exactly THAT! All of our people need to understand that the marriage bond is not a slip-knot, nor is it a temporary condition to be entered and exited with impunity. I ask you, how can we possibly be a light to the world in the institution of marriage with so many divorces within our ranks?

And then of course, one of the more obvious and noticeable ways in which we identify ourselves to the world as belonging to God is in the way we look-our appearance, and how we present ourselves to other people. But I ask you, if how we look to the world happens to be no different than the way they look to us, have we not lost one of the most important marks of Christian identity? Personally, I have always felt that we as Christians do not have to purposely try to look weird or odd. But the very fact that we belong to God in itself dictates that, as we dress modestly and conservatively as the scriptures teach, and as we manifest ourselves in a manner

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becoming to a Christian, there will be a marked difference in our appearance and demeanor as opposed to that of the people of this world. You see, how we act and appear does indeed identify us as God's property. And if our appearance and behavior doesn't reflect that, does it not become a negative reflection on our identity? And when that happens, have we not lost one of our more identifiable characteristics?

Some it seems subscribe to the theory that clothing which might be immodest, indecent, and inappropriate in the church assembly would be perfectly acceptable to wear at the beach or swim-ming pool. Believe it or not, I have heard that very idea advanced, the idea that Paul's teaching concerning modest apparel applies only to the assembly! We've all heard of so-called "situation ethics"; perhaps we could call this "situation-based modesty." Answering a simple question should settle the matter very quickly: does the immodest all of a sudden become modest just because it's relocated to a different setting, even though both settings are in the public eye?

Then there is the speech factor—how we talk, and the kind of language for which we are known. The writer James warns us repeatedly about the improper use of the tongue in James 3. Paul admonishes us in Col. 4:6, "Let your speech be always with grace, seasoned with salt." It would almost seem that having to mention something like our speech (how we talk) would be totally unnecessary. Surely we all know that a Christian is supposed to sound like a Christian and talk like a Christian; isn't that pretty basic? Then why is it that we continue to hear within our ranks inappropriate language coming from the mouths of not necessarily the young who are constantly bombarded with this type language from their peers, but rather, in far too many cases, from those who are grown and who ought to know better? Could there be any quicker way to lose our identity as a Christian than for people to hear us talk in such a way that we become a shame and a reproach to the very name we wear?

I would mention one last area in which I believe the church is in danger of losing her identity, and this one involves itself in almost every aspect of an individual's life if he or she becomes infected with it. I'm talking about what I see as a gradual abandonment of the conservative values under which most of us were reared in favor of more liberal views that seem to be more in tune and in sync with the permissive, tolerant society in which we now live. Some folks don't like us to even use the words "conservative" and "liberal." But it seems to me we might as well face reality and understand what we see taking place.

When we see the Church of Christ tolerating the same works of the flesh that are being tolerated in the denominational churches, hasn't something gone haywire somewhere along the way? Folks will cry "patience and longsuffering" in the face of rampant sin. The

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scriptures of course require both of these virtues, and virtues indeed they are! But brethren, let's don't confuse patience with toleration, or longsuffering with permissiveness. The very day in which we begin to tolerate sin in the church and allow it to continue unchecked will be the day in which we begin a downward spiral into spiritual oblivion. We don't need that today—the church simply can't afford that! —P.O. Box 1222, Bruceville, TX 76630