

DESPISING THE CHURCH

"What? have ye not houses to eat and to drink in? or despise ye the church of God, and shame them that have not? What shall I say to you? shall I praise you in this? I praise you not." I Corinthians 11:22.

In connection with the Lord's Supper, Paul asked a very arresting and important question concerning one's attitude toward the church: "Despise ye the church of God?" The attitude that one has toward the church is a matter of great importance in life. It is also tremendously important that one have the right view concerning the two ordinances of the church --baptism and the Lord's Supper. One should not take the wrong view of these ordinances. They are not sacramental, but they are symbolic. They do not have any saving efficacy, but they do portray great facts of infinite moment to the life of man. It is a tragic and a sad thing for these two ordinances to be misused, perverted or changed from their true meaning.

Baptism is a portrayal of great historic facts --the death, burial and resurrection of our Lord. The Lord's Supper, which is to be observed again and again in remembrances of Christ, reminds us of the spiritual help we get from the Lord. These ordinances must not be misused or perverted. They are not to be observed in order to obtain the forgiveness of our sins. They are to be observed by those whose sins are forgiven already, and who have been saved by Christ, the one and only Saviour. Both of these ordinances are symbolic. They are not intended to save or to have any part in salvation and our relationship with Him Who gives it. These ordinances are to be observed only by those who have repented of their sins, accepted Christ as their Saviour, followed Him in scriptural baptism and dedicated their lives to Him as their righteous Lord and Master. These ordinances are to be administered by order of the Church. They should have our most serious attention. Our attitudes toward them should be well-pleasing to God.

Paul saw those early Corinthian Christians perverting the ordinance of the Lord's Supper. He was grieved that they were making of it a feast. To this fact his righteous soul rose in protest, and he asked the question, "Despise ye the church of God?" The Lord's Supper was never intended as a means of satisfying the appetite. To use it for that purpose is to pervert and debauch it.

This question, "Despise ye the church of God?" shocks us. Can it be possible that Christians would abuse this sacred institution? The word, "despise," has a far-reaching meaning. There is a tremendous difference between hating and despising. Hating is of the heart and despising is of the head or mind. Even our Lord Jesus made this distinction. He said, "No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon" (Matthew 6:24). Since despising is of the mind, it literally means "to look down on," "to subordinate," "to lightly esteem," or "to hold in contempt." We can despise the church by undervaluing, disparaging or neglecting it. Many church members despise their church. They do not hate it, but they do undervalue, look down on, neglect and subordinate it.

Anybody who puts his personal interests above the interests of his church certainly despises the church. Anybody who puts loyalty to another organization or to other activities above loyalty to his church certainly despises the church. Those who refuse to fellowship with a New Testament church when they move into a community despise the church. Those who profess to be saved but will not be baptized into the membership of the church most assuredly despise it.

A New Testament church is the only institution fashioned and founded by our divine Saviour and Lord. Concerning it He said, "The gates of hell shall not prevail against

it." Through the centuries they have not done so. A New Testament church is the greatest, grandest and most important organization in a community. It is an institution which concerns conscience, convictions, character, consecration, conduct and charity. It is a necessary institution, the best teacher of righteousness which we have, the friend of childhood, the inspirer of youth, the strengthener of middle life and the comforter of old age. I like to think of my church as being the place where the Word of God is preached, the power of God is felt, the spirit of God is manifested, the love of God is conceived and the salvation of God is received.

A church is not perfect. It could not be because its members are not perfect. Beecher said, "The church is not a gallery for eminent Christians, but a school for the education of imperfect ones." The church is the most helpful, most unselfish, most charitable and most important organization on earth today. It gives me boundless joy to say, "That is my church. That church is the local headquarters for the biggest business on earth." The church has a God-given mission that endows her with a purpose, a place and a power which is not held by any other organization on earth. In this respect she is without a peer. She is in partnership with God in Christ Jesus. Her mission is the same as that of Christ. She is the repository of the life-giving gospel of Christ. Her mission is to introduce the lost to Christ. The world may produce organizations more effective at entertaining, more successful as establishments for feeding or more expert in social service; but, as a soul-winning, hope-giving and life-building organization, the church has the field to herself.

What are some of the ways in which people "despise the church"?

I. By Their Lax Religious Beliefs And Convictions.

People ought to know what they believe and why they believe it. They ought to know what is the significance of it all. Why do we believe in the deity, Saviourhood and Lordship of Christ? Why do we stake our all on Him? Why do we teach that salvation is obtained only through Christ? We ought to be able always and everywhere to give a reason concerning the hope that is in us.

II. By Their Failure To Support The Church.

The church merits our best and strongest support. It commands the highest respect and demands the greatest support. Every member of the church should count it a privilege to support it. Each church member is either an asset or a liability, a booster or a knocker, a helper or a hindrance, a good soldier of Christ or a spiritual slacker. How long has it been since you spoke a good word for your church? "Boosters don't knock, and knockers don't boost. Be a booster!"

If you have the proper conception of the importance of the church and a deep love for it, you will support it in at least three ways:

1. With your presence.

Genuine Christians will not forsake the assembling of themselves together. A person, who is physically able to attend church and will not do so on any given Sunday, tells the members of his church and the world that he has no interest at all in the church that day. The empty pew problem is the greatest liability of any church, and it is the scandal of Christendom. The non-church goer is a great liability to and a black spot on any church. Many have their names on church books, but that is all that it amounts to. They have a church home, but they never come home. They stay away because they do not have any interest in their spiritual welfare, they dread to behold their own faces in the scriptural mirror, they do not have any interest in the Lord's work and they are determined to avoid all personal responsibility.

It is a tragedy that many people never darken the doors of a church, unless it be to attend some funeral or wedding held therein. How distressing that people anywhere should neglect habitual attendance upon worship in God's house and how terrible that responsive, impressionable children should be brought up without any attention being paid to the church and its teaching and preaching appointments, which contribute so vitally to the uplift and betterment of humanity. The matter of church attendance ought to be written deeply into the lives of men and women for their own sakes, for the sake of others, and for Christ's sake. Church attendance ought to be one of the great habits fixed resolutely, conscientiously and unwaveringly in men's lives.

We can "despise the church" by failing to make preparation for the worship services. People say that a preacher ought to prepare his messages, and they are eminently correct. He ought to think and pray and delve and study before he seeks to expound the Scriptures and to counsel the people. Even so, the congregation should prepare for public worship in God's house. There is all the difference in the world in congregations. It is like going into a very cold room or into a warm, comfortable room. People who are unsympathetic, prayerless, indifferent, cynical and critical can create a frigid atmosphere. Jesus tells us that we are not only to take heed to what we hear, but also to how we hear. You can hear with a sympathetic mind and heart. We ought to go to church with spirits attuned, prepared by prayer and meditation, hoping for a blessing for our own lives, and for the lives of others. Everybody ought to go to church with the prayer that the preacher's subject be divinely appointed and he be God-guided. That is godly preparation for church worship, and how immeasurable blessed it is. We can "despise the church" by the lack of worthy preparation.

2. With your prayers.

The church was born in prayer and it must be kept alive and growing through prayer. He wants us to pray for the pastor, the officers and the members of the church. It requires more Christianity and a stronger character to pray for them and to support them than it does to criticize them and to find fault with them. And you can be sure of this, when you hear one criticizing and finding fault with them that there is a person who never prays for them. Complaining and praying never go together.

A praying church is a great church. No church can be great and powerful unless it has some great pray-ers among its members.

3. With your purses.

It costs money to run a church although many church members do not know it. Many church members accept the blessings and privileges of their church, but never contribute a cent toward its maintenance. They let others do all the paying and then they talk about what our church failed to give last year. But remember that complaining and paying do not go together either.

III. By Their Inconsistent Lives.

We can "despise the church" by lives that do not tally with the professions we have made. The church is to hold up the standards and ideals and is always to summon people from the lower to the higher sphere of living. "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven."

The best argument for Christianity is some Christian who lives it day by day. We can "despise the church" by unworthy and inconsistent behaviour as professed friends and followers of Christ. Our lives should be lived for Him. Our talents may be limited, but we can live for Him. Some men went to Gladstone, that great British leader, who went to church every Sunday and said to him, "You know more in an hour than that rector in the pulpit can tell you in a year." Gladstone replied, "I would not agree to that. I would not agree to any of that, for I need the public service of God's house. I would like for all England to know, and for all the British Empire to know, that I count the religion of Christ as the one important matter for man's attention and I want all men to take knowledge that I count the will of Christ and the work of His church supreme in men's lives."

Because the church fulfills man's greatest needs, you need it. You need her Christ, her gospel, her fellowship, and her restraining influences. You have needs that cannot and will not be supplied except through the agency of the church. The church may get along without you, but you cannot get along without her as you should. You and your family need the church. Line up with your church and live for Christ in it. Do not wait until you die for people to learn that you were a member of the church. Through the gospel of its crucified and risen Lord, the church has a message of hope -- hope for lost men, hope for the bereaved, and hope for the great adventure -- hope that is eternal.