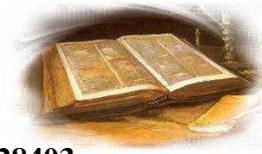


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The Church in Crisis (Continued) - by Edward O. Bragwell, Sr.

The "Restoration Movement" in the U.S. that began early in the nineteenth century (although early seeds of it date back into the eighteenth century) produced a widespread return to the New Testament order. The "back to Bible" message spread rapidly throughout the nation. Evangelistic fervor was high. Many believers were baptized for the remission of their sins and local churches were started without any denominational affiliation. The sense of brotherhood with those of like precious faith was deep and genuine. There was again an identifiable remnant of God's people at work. The ancient gospel message rang loud and clear from the pulpits of local churches meeting in school houses, under brush arbors, in private homes and in modest buildings they had bought or built.

But, by the middle of the century the church was in crisis again. There was a sizable segment of the brotherhood that had come to believe that the great work of evangelizing the world would not be accomplished without brethren's combining their efforts and resources into some kind of working arrangement larger than a local church. Various co-operative arrangements began to be formed

around the country into which individual Christians and local churches pooled their moneys. This movement ultimately evolved into a nationwide organization known as the American Christian Missionary Society in 1849. From the beginning there were brethren who opposed these arrangements and societies insisting that the local church was the only scriptural functioning organization to do the work of the church. The controversy occupied much of the attention of brethren for the rest of the nineteenth century. Sermons were preached, papers were published, and debates conducted about the issue. During that period the issue over mechanical instrumental music in worship was thrown into the mix. As had been the case in the great apostasy that followed the death of the Apostles, a vast majority of the church went with the innovators - leaving a remnant adhering to the ancient order. The American Religious census of 1906 recognized the "churches of Christ" and the "Disciples of Christ" (Christian Church) as separate movements. After that, for the most part members of churches of Christ looked upon the Christian Church as another

Protestant denomination.

For the most part the churches that did not go with the society/instrumental music movement were not as affluent as those who did. Thus in the early days of the twentieth century very few of the churches were able to support full-time preachers to work with them. The majority of the preachers made their living at farming or some trade during the week preaching on Sundays and in gospel meetings barely being supported enough to meet their expenses. Yet, hundreds were baptized and the churches grew in leaps and bounds during the first half of the century. It was rare for a gospel meeting to close without several being baptized into Christ. By the end of WWII the "remnant" had grown and prospered. Most churches in cities and towns had full-time preachers and many country congregations had preaching every Sunday. The cause of New Testament Christianity was on the march. There were some controversies during this period that ultimately proved to be no more than a small speed bump in the road. Then came the 50's and 60's and another major crisis. It revolved around efforts once again to activate the church universal in the form of "sponsoring church" and various institutions designed to do the work of the church. As in past crises the "issues" were discussed in papers, pulpits and debates until ultimately the lines were drawn between conservative/non-institutional and the liberal/institutional churches. As in the past, the majority of the brethren

went with the innovators and have become more and more liberal in doctrine and practice with time. But, in spite of the dire predictions of the more liberal brethren, the conservative/non-institutional brethren not only survived but grew and prospered across the nation. Hence, New Testament Christianity is still alive and well in this country and in many places around the world.

Now in these early years of the twentieth first century, I believe that the church is once again in a crisis of major proportions. While I am optimistic and confident that the church in the long term will weather the storm and a remnant will once again persevere. However, in the short term I am far from optimistic. I believe we have some rough waters ahead in the immediate future that will try the faith of us all. This time the crisis is not as focused on one or two well-defined issues, but is caused by several seemingly unrelated matters that threaten the very fiber of the church. Some of these matters have been around for years, but not nearly to the degree that they are now and because they were mostly confined to a few relatively isolated cases - but each has grown in the number of influential advocates and practitioners of each position. All these issues combined constitute a major crisis for the church that in my judgment could easily fuel the need for another "restoration movement" in many areas of the country.

The quality of preaching emanating from our pulpits.

Much of the preaching in our pulpits is like cotton candy - a lot of fluff and very little nourishment. Too many gospel meetings are filled with sermons(?) that are mostly anecdotal sprinkled lightly with scripture to give them a mild religious flavor. Very little real Bible teaching finds its way into the modern presentation/performance (I refuse to call such a sermon) of some of the more popular and used preachers among us. This is not just the subjective opinion of an old tired preacher, I have heard the same concerns expressed by faithful gospel preachers of all ages in recent months. There are still a goodly number of preachers who take the Bible in hand and "preach the word." but I fear that their tribe is decreasing rather than increasing. Churches fed on this kind of preaching can only grow weaker in the "knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ." The situation is not likely to improve as long as "the people love to have it so." (Cf. **Jeremiah 5:31**). Until brethren in the pew rise up and say "enough already" to the leadership that continues to invite such shallowness into the pulpits, things will not likely improve.

Corporate style leadership managing churches.

One of the great needs among the churches is that of qualifying and appointing faithful men to the eldership. I can name sizeable churches that have operated for years without an eldership. This ought not to be. Having said that, there is a grave problem among many of those

churches that do have elderships. The elders and the congregations they serve view their position and work to be much like corporate boards in the business world. This is especially true of the larger and more affluent churches in urban areas and this mentality is fast spreading to smaller churches in more suburban and rural areas. Often they are chosen and appointed not because they have proven themselves capable of "ruling their houses (families) well," and of "convicting the gainsayer," but because they have proven themselves to be successful in the corporate world. They approach their work as corporate managers rather than shepherds of the flock of God. Their prime concern is to see that the church has show-case facilities and programs that will attract the most "customers" or "clients" possible from the community and to ensure that a budget is maintained that will pay for those facilities, their upkeep and future expansions. They often will look for a preacher whom they believe will facilitate that objective. He must be charismatic with the charisma to be a great P. R. man for the corporation, excuse me, I mean church. When a personnel problem arises the best solution is the one that will minimize the loss of "customer base" and revenue rather than what the scriptures demand of shepherds who truly care for each sheep in the flock of God over which they are supposed to be overseers. As long as these conditions exist churches will continue to be spiritually

malnourished and ripe for every wind of doctrine that comes along. Things will not get better until churches come to realize what real elders are like and that their work is that of tending God's sheep and going before them setting examples for them to follow and not bosses nor lords demanding their subjects to blindly follow their lead.

Also, as part of the corporate mentality, elders are more concerned with running a well oiled corporate machine than they are with watching for the souls of those over which they have been made overseers. They are good at drawing up corporate plans that organize and departmentalize a maze of activities that really belong to the Christian's work as an individual. All of this gives the appearance on paper that this church is really on the ball and has every base covered. As a result many congregations are top heavy with organization leaving little room for individual initiative. Christians come to feel that in order to do the Lord's work that they need to be assigned a place on the organizational chart. A Methodist friend once told me that his church was so organizationally minded that if two of their preachers were to fall out of an airplane they would have to organize a landing committee before they could hit the ground. Brethren seem to forget that the bulk of the Lord's work is to be done by individual Christians as they go about their daily lives. Again, this condition will not get much better as long as "the people love to have it so."

Redefining of marriage and liberalization of divorce.

There has always been some differences of views on marriage and divorce among brethren. Until recent years these differences were very limited in their impact upon local churches because only a few brethren could be found that held views differing from the overwhelming majority of brethren. Even those who held those views differing from most brethren did not openly push their viewpoints because there were so few divorces in local congregations. But that has changed since divorce has become more socially acceptable and preachers and churches have had to deal with a huge increase in the number of divorces among members and prospective members of local churches. All of this has given more urgency to studying the subject and making application to situations as they exist today. As a result many Christians, especially preachers, are giving more time to the study of all aspects of the subject and coming to very conflicting conclusions about the institution of marriage itself and how a marriage can be scripturally dissolved. Some of these conclusions that are being openly espoused will, if widely adopted, destroy the institution of marriage as we have known it and as it is revealed in the scriptures. They will also open the door for adulterous marriages within congregations. These conclusions are not matters of individual conscience and personal practice, but matters that strike at the very foundation of the oldest God-ordained institution and they force local churches to decide whether or not they will fellowship adulterous relationships. *****Concluded in Next Weeks Bulletin*****