

THE STRUGGLING CHURCH

Jesus said to his disciples, **“From the days of John the immerser until now the kingdom of the heavens is treated aggressively, and aggressors seize it”** (Matthew 11:12). (Note that aggressiveness can be physical or non-physical, and can take many forms.) The situation Jesus described did not change in his earthly lifetime, nor has it changed since. Authentic Christians have always had to struggle against aggressive, domineering men who seek to impose their own will in opposition to the will of Christ, both within the assemblies and outside of them. We know from the sacred writings how much Jesus struggled to promote God’s kingdom, and how much he was opposed throughout his ministry, especially by the religious leaders who eventually used their power to put him to death.

We also know that after his departure from this world Jesus’ apostles continued to struggle against the same forces, and they, too, were severely persecuted. But God said there is strength in weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9), and the Church eventually conquered the great Roman empire to become its official religion, all without lifting a sword. Although I regret to say that deviation for the teachings of the New Testament was increasing within the leadership of the churches.

Nevertheless, gradually the positive influence of the Church led to a transformation, of both the Roman people and the nations around them, away from barbarism to a culture that promoted nobility of behavior. It created an age of chivalry modeled after the great virtues of godliness described by Holy Scriptures.

However, attacks from within the Church have been as harmful as attacks from without. Even during its early years when it was guided by Jesus’ apostles themselves, there were cases of aggressive men within churches, having hardened hearts (but acting piously), who used more insidious forms of violence against it (e.g., 3 John 9-10). Indeed, Paul prophesied that after his departure aggressive men from within their midst would introduce error, and lead some astray (Acts 20:29-30).

And so it came to pass that, in time, aggressive men, having hardened hearts (but looking pious), and speaking in the name of Christ, led the majority of the people away from the pure Goodnews of Christ, and created a hybrid system by intermingling parts of Old Testament ritual, pagan religious practices, and the Roman system of government, with a perverted form of Christian doctrine to create a very popular, but mutant

church—the Catholic Church. Nevertheless, some believers (although suffering violence from persecution) continued to promote the genuine Kingdom of God underground. Most who tried to promote it openly were brutally crushed. However, in the 16th century Martin Luther succeeded in leading a movement that tried to reform the Catholic Church, purging it of its many additions, and perversions. But the Catholic Church was (and remains) too hardened, being ruled by aggressive men (who look pious), and so his Reformation movement failed to change it. Nevertheless, his movement led many to break away from the counterfeit Catholic system to create churches closer to authentic Church—the so called “protestant” churches. That movement led to a great flowering of spiritual growth among the peoples of Europe. The Bible was translated into the native tongues of the people, which encouraged their transformation to greater righteousness. England and America, especially, were elevated to greatness because of their citizens’ love for the Word of God.

In time, however, the Protestant churches, too, began to be ruled by aggressive men with hardened hearts (but acting piously). Refusing to accept more enlightened knowledge of the will of God, they began to stagnate spiritually. And, like the Catholic Church, have continued to drift further away from God’s truth instead of closer to it. But in America during the early 19th century there were faithful Christian men who refused to accept spiritual stagnation. And because of the greater availability of the Bible, these men were able to study the Word of God more carefully, and they found those Protestant churches imperfect in their obedience to Christ.

However, since those churches refused to consider improvement, being ruled by aggressive men with hardened hearts (albeit acting piously), those truly pious men struck out on their own, and began what eventually became known as the Restoration movement. One of its greatest leaders was Alexander Campbell, a mighty spokesman for God. He and other men like Barton Stone, John Smith, and Walter Scott, sought to restore the pure, unadulterated practices of the first century Church. They sought, not to reform existing church systems, but to restore the one true Church created by Christ. They wanted to practice the good news of Christ just as the early Christians did. Hence, they tried to discover how the good news of Christ was applied in the early churches by using the books of the New Testament to look for explicit examples of church activities, or by inferring such activities from other discourse in those books.

Their movement grew quickly in America, and eventually developed into a following of several million members. But, although those early pioneers eagerly sought unity, alas, their movement soon became fragmented into groups called Disciples-of-Christ, Christian-Church, and Churches-of-Christ who now have virtually no fellowship with each other. Instead, within each of those groups aggressive men with hardened hearts by stealthy maneuvering (while looking pious) have gained power. Like leaders of the Catholic and Protestant churches, they have seduced the majority, and intimidated the rest so as to impose their own wills. Hence, the churches of the Restoration movement are also on the well-beaten path of spiritual stagnation and degradation.

I grew up within the Churches-of-Christ movement, and I was always taught that we alone were the true Church of Christ because we alone were fully obedient to the Word of God. Yet, as I matured and studied the Bible more carefully, I learned that we are not yet *fully* obedient. But when I tried to help my brothers become more so, I soon discovered that there are also, within the Churches-of-Christ fellowship, powerful, aggressive men with hardened hearts (who act piously), who have seduced the majority, and intimidated the rest in order to impose their own wills.

For as soon as I resolved not to compromise in my efforts to promote obedience to Christ, I began being treated roughly by both aggressive men and aggressive women.¹ And I was finally dismissed² from Harding University, which advertises itself as a Christian institution, after 24 years service for no other reason than promoting obedience to Christ. After my dismissal they kept the reason secret, which, of course, encouraged slanderous rumors to spread about me. And they have steadfastly refused to help restore my reputation by telling the truth. Thus, those in power (acting piously) have suppressed the truth, and those without power, who know the truth, remain quite lest they too be treated violently. But God knows the truth, and in his own time he will make it known, for Jesus said,

If they have called the house-ruler Beelzebub, how much more those of his household. Fear them not therefore, for

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1. The women usually acted behind a man's back.
 2. Did you know that the first president of Harvard College (now the famous university) was dismissed because of his opposition to infant baptism?

there is nothing covered, that will not be revealed, and hid, that will not be known. What I tell you in the darkness, speak ye in the light, and what ye hear in the ear, proclaim upon the housetops (Matthew 10:25b-27).

Although I have been treated roughly by aggressive men, yet I know that this is the lot of all authentic Christians, for Paul said, **“...all those who want to live devoutly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted”** (2 Timothy 3:12). Therefore, in spite of my suffering, I have peace within my soul. Moreover, I can take a little pride identifying with Peter and the other apostles who were treated roughly by aggressive religious leaders (who no doubt appeared pious), for the Bible says this about them: **“Indeed therefore they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were considered worthy to be treated shamefully for the name of Jesus”** (Acts 5:41).

And I can also rejoice knowing there are many who have not approved how I have been treated. Nevertheless, I will not relax my crusade for God’s truth. For truth is what frees our spirit from the forceful grip of aggressive men. Remember what Jesus said: **“...ye will know the truth, and the truth will make you free”** (John 8:32). And those who are most in bondage, are those who do not know it.

I was 64 years old when I was dismissed from Harding. I have suffered many things, and have experienced much persecution from my youth until now in my efforts to live piously in Christ Jesus. Yet God has never forsaken me. He has blessed me abundantly, and I live with peace within my soul; peace that the world cannot experience. For Jesus said, **“Peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you, not as the world gives, do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, nor let it be cowardly”** (John 14:27). And again he said, **“These things I have spoken to you, so that in me ye might have peace. In the world ye have tribulation. But cheer up, I have overcome the world”** (John 16:33).

I offer this information to enlighten and encouragement you when, as a Christian, you are shamefully treated by the hands of aggressive men (especially those who appear pious). And also to urge you not to give up the good fight (1 Timothy 6:12) even though it seems you never succeed. Remember how the Church was severely persecuted by the Roman empire, yet in spite of its worldly weakness, it overcame by the unseen power of God and his truth. Therefore, look past the defeats of today, and set your eyes of the victory of tomorrow; for truth always prevails at last.

You may learn more about my efforts with the leaders of Harding University by first selecting the link “Introduction” under the heading *“Encouraging a Christian University to Obey the Command of Jesus Recorded in Matthew 18:15-17”* on the home page of my web site, www.stillvoices.org.

“Now to the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, alone wise, to God is honor and glory into the ages of the ages. Truly” (1 Timothy 1:17).

Note: All Scripture verses quoted in this essay are from A Conservative Version Bible.

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