

DEATH, AND NEW LIFE

It is not at all uncommon to hear men speak of the early days of Christianity as a time when the church was pure. We talk a great deal about restoring their faith and purity. We dream of experiencing First Century Christianity in our own day and age. We look with a certain degree of disdain upon churches that die, institutions that go sour, and movements that crystalize. “Oh, that we could only have the kind of Christianity that they had in the First Century”, we lament.

Somehow the impression is conveyed that if we could ever recapture what they had, our churches would never die, and our every endeavour would be a perennial source of strength and renewal.

I once felt this way too, and then it dawned upon me that virtually every church that was founded in the First Century died. At the risk of sounding sacrilegious, what did happen to the church in Jerusalem, Antioch, Ephesus, or Philippi? Each of these congregations was at one time young, vibrant, and healthy. Each is now dead. Apparently they went through the same aging process that mortals do, and ultimately ceased to exist.

Please! Let it be emphatically understood that Christianity did not die and never will! Jesus promised that the “gates of hell” would not prevail against His church. Heaven and earth will pass away, but His words, and His church will remain forever.

At the same time it is equally clear, for example, that Christianity died out in Jerusalem. This, as you know, was the very place where the church began. We cannot fault the manner by which that church came into being for it came as the direct result of inspired men operating under the influence of the Holy Spirit. Yet the Jerusalem church died anyhow. The thousands of believers who were a part of that congregation died out or were dispersed. The Jewish Temple was razed to the ground, the synagogues crumbled into oblivion, and the Christian community also disappeared from the Holy City where God had chosen to put His name.

There is a sense, of course, in which the Jerusalem church is the “mother of us all”. Like a beautiful tree she spread her branches and planted seeds throughout the world. Like a stone quarried without the use of human hands she is still growing and is destined to fill the earth. In this respect the Jerusalem church lives on in the lives of her children.

That which happened in Jerusalem, also happened in virtually every church of the First Century. All of these churches went through years of development, productivity, decline, and death. All ceased to exist, except in the lives of their children, and their children’s children. They left behind no great buildings, or large sums of money, their only legacy was their faith.

THERE WAS, HOWEVER, ONE NOTABLE EXCEPTION! THE CHURCH AT ROME. THIS CHURCH ALSO DIED, AS DID THE REST, BUT IT WAS NEVER BURIED. IT NEVER CEASED TO EXIST, AND THE ROTTEN CORPSE OF THAT CHURCH BECAME A CURSE

TO THE LIVING BODY OF CHRIST.

The church at Ephesus died and disappeared, but the church at Rome also died but did not disappear. The church in Rome refused to return to the dust of the earth from whence it came. The corpse, instead, was embalmed by rituals, and perfumed with power. It was decorated with worldly wealth and became an albatross around the neck of Christ's Living Body. The Spirit of God had departed and an evil spirit empowered that decaying carcass. While the true church was like sheep in the midst of wolves, this church was like a wolf in the midst of sheep. It became drunk with the blood of martyrs.

THE TRAGEDY OF AN UNBURIED CORPSE

Eva Peron was once a beautiful young woman, but she got sick and died. The poor soul contracted cancer, and withered away to a pitiful eighty pounds. Her last breath came at 8:25 p.m. on July 26, 1952.

Eva was a popular political figure, and was so loved by the people of Argentina that they didn't want her to be buried. Dr. Ara, a distinguished Spanish Pathologist, was hired to embalm her so that her earthly remains would become immortal. Three months later, when her corpse was put on display, thousands of people gathered with such fanatical zeal that sixteen people were crushed to death and 4,000 had to be treated for injuries.

The awesome presence of her body created such political turmoil that the head of the Argentine Intelligence Service took charge of her corpse with the intentions of giving it a Christian burial. While waiting for instructions the body was entrusted to Major Antonio Arandia, who hid the famous corpse in his apartment. One morning the Major heard a strange noise and saw a shadowy figure standing in the doorway. Assuming it was the Peronistas, he grabbed his pistol and began shooting. When he turned on the lights, he discovered to his horror that he had just killed his pregnant wife who had gotten up to use the bathroom.

At this point the plastic coated cadaver was entrusted to Col. Hector Cabanillas of the secret police. He decided to send it abroad until passions cooled among the people. In September of 1955 Eva Peron's body was sent to the Argentine Embassy in Bonn, Germany in a packing case marked "Radio Sets". Unknown to the Ambassador, it was kept in a storeroom until it could be placed in a coffin and sent to Italy.

In Rome, the body was received by a lay sister of the Society of St. Paul. Her name was Giuseppina Airoldi. She was told that the body was that of an Italian widow named "Maggi" who died in Argentina. The remains were then taken to a cemetery in Milan for burial where they would remain for the next sixteen years.

Meanwhile, back in Argentina, terrorists continued to kill in her name. Bombs exploded like firecrackers on the anniversary of her death. Signs appeared everywhere, "Where is Eva Peron's body"? "Give us back the body of our beloved Señora". Former President Pedro Aramburu was

kidnapped and murdered in a vain attempt to make him tell where Eva's body was hidden.

When word came that a terrorist group was going to Italy to search for the body, it was exhumed on September 2, 1971. After spending the night in a Perpignan garage, the body was driven to Spain. The Argentine Government secured the cooperation of the Italian, French and Spanish Governments and her body was waved across national borders without the usual customs check. On the final 450 mile lap to Madrid the body was escorted by two car loads of Spanish police. At nine o'clock in the evening it passed through the gates of a fashionable suburb and was welcomed by her husband, Juan Peron, and his new wife Isabel. Dr. Ara, who embalmed her so many years before, was also present.

The lid of her coffin was pried open and for the first time in sixteen years the famous corpse was seen. Her hair was wet and dirty. The stainless steel hairpins were so rusty they crumbled. One fingertip was broken off, and one ear was slightly bent. Other than a few minor cracks in her plastic coating, her body was much the same as it had been at the time of her burial in 1955.

The necessary repairs were made but Eva's body remained in Madrid until the Perons came back to power and Juan himself had passed away. Isabel, the new president of Argentina, sent a chartered jet-liner to retrieve the corpse. The famous body was escorted by Isabel's Social Welfare Minister, and a mystic who claimed to be in daily contact with the angel Gabriel. They were met at the airport in Argentina by a dozen bodyguards with machine guns. The body was then rushed to the crypt of the Presidential chapel to be placed along side the body of Juan Peron himself.

IS THERE NOT SOMETHING SICK AND INDESCRIBABLY PITIFUL ABOUT THIS STORY?

JESUS DID NOT RUN FROM DEATH

Jesus Christ provides us with a dramatic contrast. He did not run from death. He said that unless a grain of wheat fell to the ground and died, it would abide alone. No man took His life, He gave it. He deliberately and willingly faced death. He said that it was expedient for Him to go away so that the Comforter might come (John 16:7). This "Comforter" as you know, was the Holy Spirit. While Jesus was in His human body He could only be one place at a time. Released from that body by death, He could be simultaneously in the heart of every disciple.

The Gospels tell what Jesus began to do and teach, and the book of Acts tells what He continued to do and teach. The book of Acts is not the end of the story, it is the beginning. Jesus commanded those who followed Him to put their hands to the plow and not look back., They faced the future. Jesus died, but He did not leave His disciples like orphans. He returned as the Holy Spirit to be with them forever. For three years He had guided them from without, now He would guide them from within. Their bodies would become temples of His Holy Sprit. Though the Apostles died the Spirit of Christ did not. The Living Christ was passed like a lighted torch to the hands of others. When Paul finished his race he passed to torch to young evangelists like Timothy, Titus. Each generation passed the torch with failing hands to a new generation. Those who were aged and infirm

entrusted the charge to others who were invigorated by youth and energized by the transcendent power of Christ.

In similar fashion we know that the churches of the First Century did not die childless. Congregations like those in Jerusalem, Antioch, Ephesus, Philippi and Corinth passed on with the happy thought that their children, and their children's children would carry the Gospel to the ends of the earth, and to the end of time.

LET US NOT RUN FROM DEATH

Both of my grandfathers have been dead for years. They lived in a world of horse-drawn vehicles and homes that were illuminated with candles and kerosene lamps. They served their generation and fell asleep. They would find it difficult to function in today's world, or to relate to and understand the perplexing problems of the atomic age.

Reason compels me to acknowledge that I too will serve my generation and fall asleep. Already I feel a bit uncomfortable with the digital computerized world around me. This new generation will be served far better by my children than by me. At the same time I must also acknowledge that my children will never completely develop into the leaders they ought to be as long as I am alive. I already find it difficult not to frown over their shoulders each time they do something differently than I would do it.

There is a sense in which my life, and my faith, will continue on in the lives of my children, but there is also a very real sense in which I need to die. Not only will my body be worn out, but my capacity to adapt will also wither like a winter leaf.

The time has come for us to quit running from death. Through Jesus Christ the sting has been taken away and we can go our graves with confidence that our labour is not in vain in the Lord. He is not only able to keep that which we have committed unto Him in heaven, He is also able to shepherd and care for that which we have left behind. The gates of hell will not prevail against His church! His truth will never die! His Word will stand forever! It is only our understanding and application of His eternal truth that will shrivel and decay with the passing of time.

That which is true of individuals, is also true of congregations. Congregations also grow old and die. They inevitably lose their capacity to adapt and sometimes cease to exist altogether. The loneliness and sadness which we experience on such an occasion is brightened by the realization that the churches' children continue to carry on the work of God.

That which is true of individuals, and congregations, is also true of movements. Someone has quipped - Man, Movement, Machine, Monument. It has happened many times in Christian History, and reason compels us to believe that it will continue to happen in the future. This truth, however, need not leave us in despair, the gates of hell will still not prevail against the church of Jesus Christ.

On June 28, 1804, a group of dedicated Christian men signed a document known as “The Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery”. The opening paragraph acknowledges that they were: *“in more than ordinary bodily health, growing in strength and size daily; and in perfect soundness and composure of mind; but knowing that it is appointed for all delegated bodies once to die; and consider that the life of every such body is very uncertain, do make and ordain this our last will and testament, in manner and for following, viz; Imprimis. We will, that this body die, and be dissolved, and sink into union with the body of Christ at large; for there is but one body and one spirit, even as we are called in one hope of our calling . . .”*

Such a philosophy does not lose all, it gains all!

WHAT ABOUT THE RESTORATION MOVEMENT?

The late W. Carl Ketcherside counted at least one hundred movements in the history of the Christian church that endeavoured to restore the purity and power of First Century Christianity. The movement to which I refer began around the turn of the 19th Century and is sometimes known as the “Stone - Campbell Movement”. This movement was at one time the fastest growing movement that ever had its beginning on American soil. It espoused the noble dream of uniting all Christians in all denominations.

After about 100 years this noble movement itself became divided. The three major divisions are known as the Church of Christ, the Christian Church (Disciples), and the Christian Church (Independent). I am told that the numerical strength of all of the factions in all three groups totals a little more than 3 million. To place this number in perspective I am also told that the church in China now numbers between 50 and 100 million.

Even though the Restoration Movement is not dead, we must admit that our movement is not moving like it once did. There is also the distinct possibility that at some time in the future this movement will die, or ought to.

We need not face the prospect of death, however, with paranoia or a sense of desperation. Neither should we resent other movements that will blossom and wither without ever hearing of us. We are not the Bridegroom, we are only the friend of the Bridegroom. Jesus must increase, and we must decrease.

Is it not better to grow old gracefully than to resent our failure to function as we once did? Is it not better to smile at our children and grandchildren, than to grow bitter and senile because we cannot run faster and jump higher than they do?

When Jesus died He entered into a new dimension of living. How pitiful it would have been for His well intentioned followers to rob the grave and turn Him into a plastic coated Jesus to be dragged out on special occasions for worship. How much better for Him to “go away” that He might return with power to make the desert blossom like a rose. He is not the great “I Was”, or the great “I Will Be”. He is the Great I Am. Jesus is now! He has the power today to make every precious

moment a treasure chest of excitement.

WHAT ABOUT OTHER MOVEMENTS?

Almost every generation has been blessed by reformers who dared to challenge the status quo and who led the way for others to follow. Some of these reformers wrote books and developed catechisms and creeds. Some of these leaders “separated” themselves from others and assumed a new and distinctive “name”. Hence, they became known as “denominations” which literally means to “separate and name”.

The seeds of denominationalism were sown by the wicked one in Corinth in the first century. Various people there began following different spiritual leads like Paul, Apollos, and Cephas. Paul was quick to condemn such division and remind them that the only foundation for Christian unity is Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 3:11). Paul, Apollos, and Cephas are all dead, and so is the church at Corinth. Jesus, however, is not dead and neither is His church. No matter what happens the gates of hell; will not prevail against His church (Matt. 16:18)

From this perspective there is no death for Christians, for churches, and for movements. Outwardly we may perish, but inwardly we can be renewed every day. Physically we may wither, but spiritually we can be forever filled with abundant life.

Jesus said it like this: **I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: and whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die**” (John 11:25, 26).

God help us to focus our faith and grasp this truth! Death does not end all for those who believe, it is the gateway to life that is both abundant and eternal.

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