



The

Sharon Star

A Brief Teaching on Tithing

By Andy Snoke

According to the truth revealed in scripture, tithing (the practice of returning a tenth of your income to the Lord on a regular basis) is not optional. It is mandatory.

A “tithe” is not ours to keep for it belongs to the Lord.

An “offering” is a voluntary giving beyond a “tithe” and is optional.

“Tithing” is a mandatory returning of what is rightfully God’s. You “give” an offering. You “pay” a tithe because it is what you owe.

To withhold a tithe from God is to disobey. To withhold our tithes, is to “rob” God of what is rightfully His.

“Will a man rob God? Yet you have robbed Me!

But you say, ‘In what way have we robbed You?’ In tithes and offerings. You are cursed with a curse, For you have robbed Me, Even this whole nation. Bring all the tithes into the storehouse (author’s note: the storehouse is the local church assembly), That there may be food in My house, And try Me now in this,” Says the Lord of hosts, “If I will not open for you the windows of heaven And pour out for you such blessing That there will not be room enough to receive it” (Mal 3: 8-10, NKJV). Abraham paid tithes to Melchizedek (representing the ministry of Christ). “Then Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine; he was the priest of God Most High. And he blessed him (Abram) and said: “Blessed be Abram of God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth; ... And he gave him a tithe of all” (Gen 14: 18-20, NKJV). “For this Melchizedek, king of Salem, priest of the Most High God, who met Abraham returning from the slaughter of the kings and blessed him, to whom also Abraham gave a tenth part of all, first being translated “king of righteousness,” and then also king of Salem, meaning “king of peace,” without father; without mother; without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but made like the Son of God, remains a priest continually. Now consider how great this man was, to whom even the patriarch Abraham gave a tenth of the spoils.

And indeed those who are of the sons of Levi, who receive the priesthood, have a commandment to receive tithes from the people according to the law, that is, from their brethren, though they have come from the loins of Abraham” (Hebrews 7:1-5, NKJV).

Jacob was a continuing example of paying his tithe to God. *Then Jacob rose early in the morning, and took the stone that he had put at his head, set it up as a pillar, and poured oil on top of it. And he called the name of that place Bethel; but the name of that city had been Luz previously. Then Jacob made a vow, saying, “If God will be with me, and keep me in this way that I am going, and give me bread to eat and clothing to put on, so that I come back to my father’s house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God. And this stone which I have set as a pillar shall be God’s house, and of all that You give me I will surely **give a tenth to You**” (Gen 28: 18-22, NKJV). The book of Deuteronomy is full of scriptures on tithing such as the following:*

*“You shall truly tithe all the increase of your grain that the field produces year by year. And you shall eat before the Lord your God, in the place where He chooses to make His name abide, the **tithe** of your grain and your new wine and your oil, of the firstborn of your herds and your flocks, that you may learn to fear the Lord your God always” (Deut 14: 22-23, NKJV).*

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The previous scriptures outline the principle of tithing in the Old Testament. However, when we arrive in the New Testament, we find Jesus giving His approval to this same principal, while at the same time scolding the Pharisees for omitting the most important aspects of love and forgiveness. *“But woe to you Pharisees! For you **tithe** mint and rue and all manner of herbs, and pass by justice and the love of God. These you ought to have done, (author’s note: tithing) without leaving the others undone” (Luke 11:42, NKJV).*

At the beginning of the outpouring of the Spirit in the recent revival of 1948, the brethren that the Lord used so mightily traveled and visited many local assemblies with the message of the Kingdom. They were initially supported financially only by the raising of an offering at each church assembly visit.

As you can imagine, this method of raising funds “naturally” inspired a disorder. Under this order, it was better to visit larger congregations as you could expect a larger offering.

Also, the specific personality of the ministry could be rewarded according to his popularity, creating even more perils.

This order would naturally discourage the brethren that God had called from visiting the “one’s and two’s” and would instead encourage the visiting of larger gatherings. Under this crippled order, if a ministry traveled to simply the “one’s and two’s,” there was a good chance he would not have enough fuel to get to the next stop.

After a period of seeking the Lord and studying the scriptures, the Lord unfolded a simple method of support that would allow the Gospel of the Kingdom to be preached to the “one’s” as well as to the multitudes. This scripturally based, revealed “order” has allowed the Gospel of the Kingdom to be preached throughout the world to some of the most remote, isolated places on the face of the earth.

The present understanding and “order” for tithing is as follows:

1. The individual brings a tithe of their increase into the storehouse (the local assembly) each week. The collection on Sunday becomes part of the worship service, where we give to God what is rightfully his.

“Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I have given orders to the churches of Galatia, so you must do also: On the first day of the week (author’s note: Sunday worship) let each one of you lay something aside, storing up as he may prosper, that there be no collections when I come” (1 Cor: 16:2, NKJV).

2. The local elders (who are self supporting men, independent from financial support of the local church) keep 1/3 of the total in the local fund to

care for the poor, the stranger, the fatherless and widows and the needs of the local assembly. No local “pastor’s” salary is collected.

3. 2/3 of the total is forwarded to the church central fund (in the respective country), where it is used for the universal support of the traveling ministry (Levites) through the apostolic administration.

The basis for the 1/3 kept in the local funds, with 2/3 sent to the central fund is taken from the scripture below (Deut 26: 12-13), and interpreted as follows:

- 1/3 for the poor (the stranger, the fatherless and the widow). The scripture says that these are all “within your gates” and represent the needs of the local assembly. The stranger could be a needy person who comes in contact with a local assembly. The local assembly’s funds cover the general needs and expenses pertinent to the operation of that assembly.

- 2/3 for the Levites (the priestly tribe), which today includes support for the traveling ministry, the administration of that work and other charitable works, as the gospel of the kingdom is ministered throughout the world. This is all administered through the central fund.

Note: The division of the tithes into 1/3 local funds and 2/3 central funds was determined by the brethren who have gone before us. They, no doubt, consulted with each other and sought the wisdom of God before implementing this order. The wisdom of that decision has proven to serve the financial needs of local churches and the universal church very well over these many years. *“When you have finished laying aside all the tithe of your increase in the third year— the year of tithing—and have given it to the Levite, the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow, so that they may eat within your gates and be filled, then you shall say before the Lord your God: ‘I have removed the holy tithe from my house, and also have given them to the Levite, the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow, according to all Your commandments which You have commanded me; I have not transgressed Your commandments, nor have I forgotten them’” (Deut 26: 12-13, NKJV).*

Through this simple method of tithing, it is not necessary to take any type of “special collection” or raising funds to support the work of the Lord all over the world. No special “pleas” are usually required. The work of the Lord continues quietly, and humbly world wide through this simple order of regular and consistent tithing.

I give thanks to God for His simplicity in providing such a simple order that successfully supplies the needs of the church, both locally and universally throughout the world.

Overcoming Self

Bro. Markus Hansen

The following scripture provides clear insight into the problem that we have with SELF. It speaks of an angel, whom God named 'son of the morning star,' or literally the 'day star,' who was cast out of heaven when he desired to exalt himself above God.

*"How you are fallen from heaven,
O Lucifer, son of the morning!
How you are cut down to the ground,
You who weakened the nations!
For you have said in your heart:
'I will ascend into heaven,
I will exalt my throne above the stars of God;
I will also sit on the mount of the congregation
On the farthest sides of the north'"*
(Isaiah 14:12-13, NKJV).

From birth we inherit what caused Satan to fall from heaven - SELF. Young people are familiar with the word - selfie - a photo of oneself. These photos are posted on social networks to draw attention to the person posting the image. Self is part of our inherent character. God created man to have free will which makes us aware of ourselves. If He hadn't, the world would be filled with robots. That was not His intention. God created man because He wanted companionship, someone to talk to. Man was created in the image of God, and before Adam and Eve sinned they walked and talked together with God in the garden. After Eve and Adam ate the forbidden fruit they recognized they disobeyed God and hid from God's presence. *"And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden"* (Genesis 3:8, NKJV).

The beginning of our serious problems starts when we realize that we have a free will, and we are not willing to lay it down. People inherently want control. We do not want to be told what to do. WE DO NOT WANT TO BE TOLD WHAT TO DO. How often have you heard someone say, 'don't tell me what to do.' When we realize that we have a free will there arises the distinct possibility we will want to put ourselves first. Wanting to be the center of attention, wanting to have our own way, wanting to do it our way, wanting to play God, in fact. That was Satan's downfall. To witness this in action just watch a baby. The only thing a new-born child wants is to be fed and cuddled by the child's mother. The baby is only aware of self. The older the child becomes, if left to have his/her own way, the result is a very spoiled child. Fully grown she/he can be a problem to society. If left untutored, a child can become a bundle of self-centred fears, greeds, jealousies and self-conceit.

What Satan infused into the heads of our forefathers was the idea that they could be 'like gods.' They could be their own master. They could invent a form of happiness outside of God. In this age millions are chasing happiness but never finding it. History records that man's attempt to distance himself from God and reject Him has resulted in societies of classes, poverty, ambition, wars, prostitution, slavery, etc.

That is why we can never ever succeed in changing this present world into a place of lasting peace and rest. It is impossible. And we cannot finish the race we have started going on to become mature sons of God without God being at the center of our lives. The jet plane that flew us on a recent trip runs on jet fuel. Without it, it cannot get off the runway. No jet fuel, unable to fly - worthless. Similarly God has designed us to run on Himself. Without God as the center of our lives, we cannot carry out His will for our lives. However, we can continue on our journey towards the goal that God has set before us with God at the center of our lives. We were created in His image to be like Him, which is achievable through His energy, His power, His motivation to move forward and to move upward. There is no other way. God cannot give us happiness, peace and His kingdom while excluding Himself. It cannot happen.

This human characteristic of self poses an interesting question, "How are we to rid ourselves of self so that we can go on to perfection, to become a mature son of God?" It is a very difficult task because we cannot rely on self to be rid of self. The Apostle Paul aptly describes the core of the problem in his writings. *"The law of Moses was unable to save us because of the weakness of our sinful nature"* (Romans 8:3, NLT). Though the Jewish Nation had the perfect, righteous and complete law of God, they were not able to walk in it. For generations they tried but failed. Time and time again they turned away from following God and only after being defeated, carried away as slaves, did they see the error of their ways and begin to call on God and beg for mercy. Yes, God heard their cries and rescued them only to have them reject God again and again. The only way the Israelites were able to regain God's favour was to realize they needed help to pull them out of the hole they dug for themselves. They had to raise their arms and say to God, 'I surrender.' They had to, figuratively speaking, put down their weapons and willingly say, 'I give up.'

Surrendering is not easy for anyone, and repenting of our sinful ways of selfishness is onerous. Giving up our desire to be our own king is very, very difficult indeed. It means unlearning all the self-conceit and self-will that man has learned over thousands of years.

Bro. Gilbert Price taught our children a song, and it goes like this:

Put Jesus first and others second,
Put yourself at the end of the line
And you will find real joy in your life,
Spelled J-O-Y.

The truth of the little song is the key to achieving a surrendered life in Christ.

The utmost evil vice of self is pride. It was because of pride that Lucifer, the Day Star, became Satan, the Devil. Daniel writing about King Nebuchadnezzar wrote: *"But when his heart was lifted up, and his spirit was hardened in pride, he was deposed from his kingly throne, and they took his glory from him"* (Daniel 5:20, NKJV).

It is pride that leads to every other vice. “*For all that is in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—is not of the Father but is of the world*” (1 John 2:16, NKJV). Pride is the antithesis of God.

Remember that God’s ultimate goal is to refashion us into the image of His Son, Jesus Christ. This will not happen through a mere improvement of our human nature or by a mere moral reformation. It will only occur through a complete transformation.

For the caterpillar to turn itself into a butterfly, it has to wind itself in a silky cocoon and then die. “*Most assuredly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain*” (John 12:24). Within the cocoon, the larva undergoes what is called a complete metamorphosis, meaning a change in the nature of the larva into a different creature by supernatural means. When this transformation is complete, it emerges as a beautiful butterfly no longer tied to the earth.

I want to assure you this transformation has already begun. It began when we accepted Christ as our Saviour. It progressed when we went under the waters of baptism. “*Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life*” (Romans 6:4). It progressed further when we were filled with the Holy Spirit. Hallelujah! And glory to God, this transformation is moving us steadily forward as we endeavour to walk in the light of this present move of the Holy Spirit.

This transformation is a process that God is taking us through. It may be hard, difficult and painful at times, but it is God that is remaking us into His image! You may be comforted to know that very few people notice that this process of transformation is occurring in their personal lives and in God’s Church. Becoming sons of God is a process of gradual change. “*Now the Lord is the Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord*” (2 Corinthians 3:17-18, NKJV). Oh, Glory to God.

Now the step towards becoming sons of God is voluntary. You are called and chosen by God but it is you who must accept the call. The process of becoming a new creation begins by losing what we call ourselves. Out of ourselves, into Christ, is the only way. These two words, ‘in Christ,’ occur over and over again in the writings of the Apostle Paul. Early Christians did not hesitate to recognize that the invasion of a new quality of living was the result of allowing themselves to be completely immersed into Christ. Christ’s will is to become our will and we are to think His thoughts, as Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 2:16 “*we have the mind of Christ.*” To be ‘in Christ’ is the opposite of being submerged in self. It is a state of becoming aware that righteousness in God’s sight can never be gained by self-effort or by good works. Our status is realized not based on trying to obey the law by our own human efforts but by total reliance on Christ.

Fortunately, before Jesus ascended to be with His father, He showed us how this can be done. Jesus said: “*Father, if it is Your will, take this cup away from Me; nevertheless not My will, but Yours, be done*” (Luke 22:42). That is the key,

“*not My will, but Yours, be done*”.

During His ministry Jesus not only taught His disciples how to conduct their lives, He showed by example how they were to conduct their lives as His followers. Jesus also knew that when He would no longer be there to support His disciples they would need extraordinary help to emulate Himself, to leave their selfishness behind and complete the job He was preparing them for.

So, He promised to send His other-self, the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit. The early manuscripts of the Book of John are written in Koine Greek, used at the time of the writing of the New Testament. In Koine Greek, the root meaning of Paraclete is, ‘to call alongside to one’s help.’ The idea behind Paraclete is the notion of stimulation, inspiration and as One who will help when called upon (for references see Acts 9:31, Romans 12:8, 15:4-5, Hebrews 13:22 and John 14:26). Note that most modern translations of the New Testament use the word “helper” to describe the Holy Spirit, which He is; One you can call upon to inspire you, to move you along the right path, to help you get where God wants to take you, to help you be obedient and to comfort you if needed.

Jesus said: “*If you love Me, keep My commandments. And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper; that He may abide with you forever—the Spirit of truth*” (John 14:15-17, NKJV).

It is vital to understand that we will only reach that perfect state of maturity in Christ under the leadership and headship of the five-fold ministry that God has placed in the Church.

“*And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ*” (Ephesians 4:11-13, NKJV).

Recognizing the need and residing under the covering of our head and walking and yielding to the Holy Spirit will eventually help us rid ourselves of self. This will result in a change from living by the dictates of our human nature to reflecting the mirror image of Jesus, to reflecting Jesus in our everyday living. This is God’s ultimate design and plan. We will not realize the promise of entering into sonship in any other way. Our human nature is too weak to reach maturity by itself. Why? “*Because the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be*” (Romans 8:7, NKJV). Like the cocooning larva, we must surrender ourselves to the Holy Spirit and allow Him to wrap us up in Himself so He can transform us into the very image and likeness of Christ. We need to surrender our will completely, without reservation, to Jesus and to the Holy Spirit while remaining under the mantle of God’s church.

Unfortunately pride is one thing that can prevent us from completely surrendering to Christ. If you are to surrender your complete will to Christ and to the Holy Spirit, it requires yielding your mind, human reasoning and emotions to Christ.

Over the years we have witnessed that children readily receive the infilling of the Holy Spirit and then burst into speaking in other tongues. More mature individuals often struggle to receive the same blessing.

Why? Because pride can be a barrier to our infilling. We may be afraid to yield to our emotions, to lose control of self, afraid of doing what we deem as improper, crying openly or giving our tongue over to the Holy Spirit. We don't want to chance sounding silly if we break out in speaking in tongues. It may be pride that causes us to want to act in ways that we perceive as proper. We may embarrass ourSELVES if we let the Holy Spirit take control of our tongue. We hesitate to enter into a new experience and then lose out to the enormous benefits available in communicating with our Creator on a spiritual level.

No wonder Jesus said: *“Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of God”* (Mark 10:14, KJV). There is no one more innocent than a child. They are so willing to completely give their little lives into the care of their parents. They are not encumbered with fears and anxieties but run gleefully, squeal with arms outstretched, and fling themselves into the arms of a loved one.

Jesus' words: *“Be ye perfect”* was not a slip of the tongue. He meant it. But before you allow the Holy Spirit to begin the work to make you perfect it would be wise to count the cost. It will cost you everything! You do have a free will and if you choose you can push the Saviour away. If you do not push Him away, understand that He is going to see the job through to the finish.

Whatever suffering it may cost you, whatever unimaginable purification process Christ will take you through, He will never rest until the job is complete.

“These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world” (John 16:33, NKJV).

“For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us” (Romans 8:18, NKJV).

The goal that Christ has for us is absolute perfection; and no power in the whole universe, except ourselves, can prevent Him from reaching that goal. If you choose to allow Christ to make you perfect, remember that He is the 'Perfecter' as the writer of the book of Hebrews wrote. *“And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer, and perfecter of faith”* (Hebrews 12:1-2, NIV).

Have you surrendered your life to Christ? Have you been filled with the Holy Spirit? Have you come under the covering of the Church? Jesus with outstretched arms is waiting if you will flee to him and give Him your all. Give him your 'SELF.' Give up your pride, give up on insisting on having your way and allow yourself to be totally absorbed into Christ.

Pattern of the Early Church

By P.J. Mathew

The church was born around circa 30 A.D. shortly after the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. It was made up of the predominantly Galilean band of Jesus' disciples together with those who responded to the preaching of the apostles in Jerusalem. This body of believers abode in the apostolic faith and doctrines. It was an era of sincere hearts coming together to exalt the name of Christ whom they had seen, heard and touched (1 John 1:1). The apostles and the faithful ones were very glad to meet in the temple courts to praise God and thank the Almighty for all the favors with which they had been blessed. It was also noted as an epoch of an unprecedented spread and growth of Christianity beginning in Jerusalem, Asia Minor, Corinth, Antioch, Rome, and elsewhere in the then known world. Central to the apostolic message was the resurrection of Jesus Christ our Lord. In this article, we want the readers to understand how the early universal church functioned as a spiritual body under the dynamic leadership and the guidance of the apostles.

In Acts of the Apostles Ch. 2: 42-47 *“They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and of prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts.*

They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved” (NIV).

The attributes of the early church.

It was a learning church. The early church carefully and diligently listened to the teachings of the apostles. The Bereans received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true (Acts of Apostles, 17:11). The early church at Ephesus hated the practice of Nicolaitans (Rev. 2:6).

Nicolaitans- Def. It was a sect or party of evil influence in early Christianity especially in the seven churches of Asia Minor (modern Turkey). They held the view that man can freely partake in sin because the law of God is no longer binding.

Paul reminded the church at Colosse that they should not be deceived by fine-sounding arguments (Col. 2:4). The church at Colosse was further admonished to be *“rooted and built up in Him (Christ), strengthened in the faith as you (they) were taught”* (Col. 2:7). A church that is rooted in Christ and consistent with apostolic teachings will remain strong and stable in perilous times. Such a church will be like a tree planted by the rivers of waters. The church of our times is no different from those of the early church in submission to the teachings of the apostolic brethren.

Ephesians 4: 11- 13, “It was he (Jesus) who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming” (NIV). The early church did not have a Bible or commentaries as we possess now, yet the apostles spoke the word under the anointing and the church listened attentively. The early church was convinced of the authenticity and spiritual authority of the apostles as they ministered the word. We must remember the fact that all apostles except Paul were with Jesus Christ, and they had seen His glory and power.

A church of fellowship

The early church enjoyed the company of each other. They had a binding close fellowship and loved each other very dearly. There were no cliques in the church. The early church was not organized as of modern times, yet it had a genuine fellowship. They shared everything they had, and there were no needy persons among them (Acts 4:32). One distinguishing mark of a true church is love for God and love for one another in the body of Christ. In the absence of this agape love there will be no genuine fellowship in the church. John, the apostle, emphasizes the significance of fellowship and love in his first epistle. “We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ” (I John 1:3, NIV). Fellowship among the members of the body of Christ is compared to the unity of Father and Son, Jesus Christ. Furthermore, John writes that “if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin” (I John 1: 7). Fellowshiping helps the members of the body to know one another intimately. It allows people to open up to one another and builds trust and confidence in the body of Christ. Intriguingly, as we fellowship, the blood of Jesus purifies from all sin, according to John. There was no sin in Adam’s and Eve’s lives as long as they had fellowship with God in the Garden of Eden. We do not fellowship at church as a social pastime, but instead we gather and fellowship, focusing on Christ in our midst. Ironically, modern communications have hindered people from having much face-to-face time for each other.

A praying church

A church that prays together stays together. The early church spent considerable time in fasting and praying. Consequently, the church experienced deliverance, healing and great power. Wonders and miracles took place when they came together to pray and worship. A classic example was the church at Jerusalem which was praying for the release of Peter who had been imprisoned by Herod. God sent his angel to the prison and unshackled Peter, and he came to the house where they were praying for his safe escape (Acts 12:12). A praying church is a powerful church. “After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken.

And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly” (Acts 4:31, NIV). The church at Antioch fasted and prayed for Paul and Barnabas before they were sent off (Acts 13:3). The early church sought the Lord in fasting and praying for any decision to be made. When Grecian Jews complained against the injustice to their widows, the apostles asked the people to choose seven men known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom to take care of the situation as the apostles committed themselves not to neglect the ministry of the word of God. When all the seven men were selected, they were presented before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them, confirming their ministry (Acts 6: 1-6). One notable fact here is that the apostles spent very little time on administrative matters; instead they prayed and ministered the word of God boldly. As a result, the word of God spread and the number of disciples increased rapidly and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith (Acts 6:7). The Church at Philippi was known to be a praying church (Philippians 1:19).

A reverent Church

The early church was very much aware of the abiding presence of God in their midst. They felt the awe of God in their gatherings. They worshipped in the Spirit and in the fear of God. They were constantly reminded of the holiness of God. When Ananias and Sapphira lied to Peter about the sale of their property, the price they had to pay was death. As a result, great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about this event (Acts 5:11). Reverence for God has to be practiced in the place of worship, homes, working places and in our daily lives. We are the temple of God and the Spirit of God dwells in us. God’s temple is sacred and we are that temple (I Cor. 3:16). In Hebrews 12: 28-29, we read, “Worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire” (NIV). The early church met in humble homes of the devotees and in the temple courts of Jerusalem. Yet when they gathered together they felt the reverential fear of the presence of God. The temple courts were always busy places for the Jews. Buying and selling and offering sacrifices were the regular features of Jewish life. However, apostles and other disciples were not prevented from having spirit-filled worship at the same temple precincts. The apostles and the God-fearing Jews had gathered in the temple on the Pentecost feast day when the Holy Spirit descended on them and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. The temple in Jerusalem had been the gravitating force during the early days of the church.

A worshipping Church

The early church gathered every day to worship God in the temple courts. To a true believing church, worship is not a weekly obligation but the continual lifting up of one’s heart and spirit to God. The church has to come together as a body in a place to worship God. The Jewish Christians who were spread out in large towns of Rome were encouraged to hold church meetings regularly. “And let us not hold aloof from our church meetings, as some do. Let us do all we can to help one another’s faith, and this the more earnestly as we see the final day drawing nearer” (Hebrews 10: 25, J.B. Phillips). The body of Christ comes together to worship God in Spirit and truth.

We come to a place of worship, not because it is in a magnificent structure or has some historical and religious pedigrees. We go to seek and worship the Lord in all sincerity. The Samaritan woman had been taught to worship in a particular mountain (Mount Gerizim) but Jesus made it very clear to her that it is not the place that is important, but it is the manner of true worship that matters. Jesus said, “Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth” (John 4: 23-24, NIV). True worship is when the spirit, the immortal and invisible part within us, speaks to and meets with God, Himself immortal and invisible.

A growing church

The church witnessed a phenomenal growth during the apostolic and post-apostolic age. The number of men (excluding) women grew to about five thousand (Acts 4:4). In Acts 5:14, “Nevertheless, more and more men and women believed in the Lord and added to their number” (NIV). “And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved” (Acts 2:47, NIV). It is believed that the size of the church by 300 A.D. varied between 5 and 15 percent of the population of the Roman Empire, which was between 50 million and 75 million (Christianity through the Centuries, Earl E. Cairns, P. 93). In Acts 9:31, “The whole Church throughout Judaea, Galilee and Samaria now enjoyed a period of peace. It became established and as it went forward in reverence for the Lord and in the strengthening presence of the Holy Spirit, continued to grow in numbers” (Phillips). Jesus, before ascending to the heavens, implored the apostles to “make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19, NIV). Increased numerical growth of the church is not only a present-day manifestation but it had well begun under the leadership of the first century apostles.

It was a church where wonders and miracles happened.

Healings, miracles and wonders occurred as the early church met together. The apostles waited on the Lord in fasting and praying for the deliverance of the church. In Acts chapter 3, we read about how the crippled beggar at the temple gate, called “Beautiful,” was healed. We read in Acts 3: 8, “He jumped to his feet and began to walk. Then he went with them into the temple courts, walking and jumping, and praising God” (NIV). The blind received sight, the crippled walked, the dead were raised to life, the paralyzed were made whole and the deaf were healed. All manner of infirmities were cured in the early church meetings. Faith and the hope were at a very high level among the apostles and the disciples. Consequently, they performed many miraculous signs and wonders among the people. More and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number (Acts 5:12- 14). They literally remembered and believed in the words of Jesus, “I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father. And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father. You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it” (John 14: 12-13, NIV).

A persecuted church

One of the poignant features of the early church was that it journeyed through severe persecutions. The church at Jerusalem was the first of its kind to go through the worst kind of violent punishments for their faith in Jesus Christ. James, the apostle, was beheaded by Herod (Acts 12:2). Peter was imprisoned (Acts 12:4.) John the beloved disciple of Jesus was banished to the island of Patmos (Rev. 1: 9). Nonetheless, the church grew stronger and stronger because it was founded on Jesus Christ. Jesus said to Peter in Matthew 16: 18, “And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it” (NIV). The writer to the Hebrews reminds the young church at Jerusalem to remember their earlier days when they seemed to be drifting away from their loyalty to Christ. They stood firm in their faith in adversity, persecution, and plundering of their goods. They knew what it meant to be mistreated, to be under suspicion, and to be unpopular. They had met those situations with gallantry and honor (Hebrews 10: 32-34). “In the Roman Empire , persecution began in the first century under Nero (A.D. 54-68), who falsely accused the Christians of setting fire to Rome. Persecution also ensued under Domitian (A.D. 81-96). Under Emperor Trajan (A.D. 98-117), Ignatius of Antioch was thrown to the wild beasts in the Colosseum at Rome in A.D. 115, and Symeon of Jerusalem, successor of James and a relative of our Lord, was tortured and finally crucified in A.D. 107. The saintly Polycarp of Smyrna, disciple of John, was burned at the stake in A.D. 155 under Emperor Antonius Pius, because, by his own testimony, he would not blaspheme the King who had saved him. Under Marcus Aurelius (A.D. 161-180), the persecution continued for years and included the beheading of Justin Martyr the apologist in Rome in A.D. 166. But it seems, as always, that ‘the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.’ By A.D. 180, the Church was established in all parts of the Roman Empire and far and beyond its borders to the south and to the west” (Floods upon the Dry Ground, Charles P. Schmitt, pp.29-30). It is a fact of life that, in many ways, it is easier to face adversity than prosperity. It is true that luxuries of life ruined the Christian faith for far more people than poverty ever did. The church of today is neither free from persecution nor exempt from the lure of comforts. Although, some have been disloyal to the faith in the midst of tribulation, there has always been a remnant God kept for Himself in every age.

It was structured under the care of elders and deacons with gifts.

The apostles prayed over men who had been indicated as having gifts, and they were made the elders and deacons of the local churches. In the churches of the apostles, spontaneity was the rule of the day. The church was an organism, carried along by the buoyant life of the Holy Spirit. In Titus 1:1-5, the apostle Paul implores Titus to ordain elders in every city of the island of Crete (Greece). Acts 20: 17, NIV, “From Miletus, Paul sent to Ephesus for the elders of the church.” In I Timothy 1:1-5, we read about the imperative qualifications of an elder and in the following scriptures, 8-10, we are given the qualifications of deacons. Therefore, it is quite clear that the local church was under the oversight of elders and deacons in the first century apostolic era.

It should be no different in the present age to have the flock of Christ under the elders who have a shepherd's heart for their people. Lars P. Qualben, a Lutheran church historian, comments regarding the church government in the following words, "The local churches had elders and deacons, who supervised and directed the work of the congregation... But the early church organization was not centered in office and in law; but in the special gifts of the Spirit. The teaching, the preaching, and the administration of the Sacraments were conducted by 'gifted men' in the congregation. An elder might also teach, preach, and administer the Sacraments, but he did not do so because he was an elder, but because he was known to have 'the gift' "... (Lars P. Qualben, A History of the Christian Church, pp.94-96). Apostle Paul mentions about the gifts being imparted to Timothy, his beloved son in Christ, in II Timothy 1: 6, NIV "For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands." Again in I Timothy 4: 14, "Do not neglect your gift, which was given you through a prophetic message when the body of elders laid their hands on you." In Romans 12: 6-8, "We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully"(NIV).

Communion service was practiced regularly in the early church.

The apostles celebrated the holy communion with the saints of the first century in a regular fashion. In fact, whenever they gathered they partook of the holy communion. It was instituted as an ordinance by our Lord. Later on the apostles continued to teach and participate in the Lord's Supper or Eucharist. "Day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes..." (Acts. 2:46, RSV). At Troas, Paul spoke all night, but he made sure to receive the holy communion. Acts 20:7, "On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul talked with them, intending to depart on the morrow; and he prolonged his speech until midnight" (RSV). Acts 20:11, "And when Paul had gone up and had broken bread and eaten, he conversed with them a long while, until daybreak, and so departed" (RSV). In I Corinthians, Ch. 11: 23-30, Paul gives a few directions of how to partake of the communion. Apparently, the Corinthian church was practicing communion in an unspiritual manner.

Partaking of the holy communion on a regular basis indicates that the church was actively participating in the body and blood of Christ. To the one who partakes of the communion with faith and love, it is a means not only of memory but of living contact with Jesus Christ. It would be of no significance to an unbeliever, but to a believer, it is the way into his presence.

In conclusion, the New Testament Church of the first century analyzed the word attentively, worshipped with great reverence, was cared for and nourished by elders and deacons, and desired very much to fellowship with one another intimately. Even though persecution was at its height, almost destroying homes and killing the believers, the church witnessed an unprecedented numerical growth. Consequently, the Western Roman Empire declined and the church of the living God enjoyed peace and prosperity, although the church slipped into apostasy later on and a new moving of God's Spirit was necessary to bring it back in line with the teachings of the early church.. Indeed it was an era of the moving of the Holy Spirit all over the then known world. The apostles traveled all over the world bringing the good news of salvation to mankind.

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