

VIII

FORM AND POWER

. . . Having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof . . . (II Tim. 3:5).

Down through the years, Christendom has accumulated a great many ideas and thought patterns which are not founded in the Word of God. Some of these traditions are harmless . . . and perhaps even beautiful. Others are so wrong that they make void the Word of God.

Here are a few examples of traditions which seem harmless to me . . . but which have no foundation in the Bible.

- Tradition teaches that there were three wise men . . . but the Bible does not say so. The Bible teaches that the wise men brought three gifts, but does not tell us how many wise men there were.
- Tradition teaches that the wise men brought their gifts to the Baby Jesus when He was in a manger . . . but the Bible

does not say so. At the time the wise men came with their gifts, the Baby Jesus was in a house (Matt. 2:11).

- Tradition teaches that the angels “sang” on the night of Jesus’ birth. The Bible does not say so. The Bible teaches that the angels were praising God and “saying” Glory to God in the Highest . . . (Luke 2:13-14).
- Etcetera.

These examples seem harmless to me. Our understanding . . . or misunderstanding of these stories does not alter any doctrine of salvation, divide any church, or form the basis of any denominational creed.

It is still our obligation to be like the noble Bereans and “search the Scriptures daily to see if these things are so” (Acts 17:11). Ignorance is not better than truth, and darkness is not better than light.

A PATTERN THEOLOGY

For many years I accepted the idea that there was a “divine pattern” for the New Testament Church. I believed and taught that the “true church” could be distinguished by an external form of church government.

The Scripture which I usually quoted to prove this position was Hebrews 8:5, “. . . make all things according to the pattern showed to thee in the mount . . .” This was what I had always heard. This was what I believed. But quite frankly, I had never studied the matter for myself. I had never examined and scrutinized this passage as I should have.

Under careful scrutiny this position seemed to vanish like a vapor. That Scripture teaches that Moses was given a divine pattern for the Tabernacle, but it does not teach that we are therefore given a divine pattern for the church. It is a quantum leap from the one position to the other.

In a previous work, *These Two Commandments*, I deal with the subject in greater detail than is necessary to repeat at this

time (see pp. 94-98). After studying every example of every Greek word translated as "pattern" in the New Testament Scriptures, I have concluded that not one time do they refer to the governmental structure of our Lord's church.

Paul warned that in the last days men would be interested in a "form" of godliness . . . but would deny the "power" thereof. He seemed to be talking to me. I taught a great deal about "form" but said virtually nothing about "power."

POWER IN THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH

With a very minimum of investigation I soon discovered that the Bible had a lot more to say about power than I did. Here are a few examples:

- Jesus told His Apostles to wait for power - Acts 1:4-8.
- Peter insisted that miracles were performed by God's power - Acts 3:12.
- The Apostles gave witness of the resurrection with great power - Acts 4:33.
- Stephen was a man full of faith and power - Acts 6:8.
- Jesus was anointed with the Holy Spirit and power - Acts 10:38.
- Jesus was declared to be the Son of God with power - Rom. 1:4.
- The Gospel is the power of God unto salvation - Rom. 1:16.
- Paul's speech was not with enticing words of men's wisdom, but in the demonstration of the Spirit and of power - I Cor. 2:4.
- Paul wanted men's faith to be in the power of God - I Cor. 2:5.

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- He wanted the Ephesians to have their eyes opened to the exceeding greatness of His power to us-ward who believe - Eph. 1:19.
- The power available to believers is able to accomplish above all that we can ask or think - Eph. 3:20.
- Paul sought to appropriate in his own life the power of the resurrection - Phil. 3:10.
- Paul prayed that the Colossians might be strengthened with all might according to His glorious power - Col. 1:11.
- The Gospel came to the Thessalonians not in word only, but in power - I Thess. 1:5.
- God's work in their midst was a work of faith with power - II Thess. 1:11.
- Paul wrote to Timothy that God had not given us a spirit of fear, but of power - II Tim. 1:7.

This is just a sampling of what the Bible says about power. It says a lot more about power than it ever does about form, and if we are to be a people of the Book we need to learn to speak where the Scriptures speak and also to speak as the Scriptures speak.

A PATTERN WITHOUT POWER

Several years ago I was invited to speak at a gathering of several hundred preachers, teachers, and Christian workers. Most of us had been infected with the idea that there was a divine pattern of external forms for the church consisting of elders, deacons, etc. and that any church not conforming to this "pattern" was a counterfeit church.

To illustrate what I think is the fallacy of this position, I approached them with a bit of duplicity. I began talking to them about the "people of God in the First Century." Our

theological mind-set led them to believe that I was talking about the "New Testament Church" and the "divine pattern" as had been done so many times before.

Instead of describing the New Testament Church, however, I began to describe a First Century synagogue. I did so in a way, however, that no one recognized the difference.

I said: The people of God in the First Century were . . .

- Separate from all idolatry and unbelievers
- Extremely evangelistic
- Baptized their converts only by immersion
- Met every week to study the Scriptures
- Their assemblies were presided over by elders who met high qualifications.
- Their assemblies also had deacons who met high qualifications.
- They supported the work of God with tithes and offerings.
- They did not allow a woman to teach or to usurp authority over a man.
- They gave a great emphasis to prayer.

etc.

The punch line came like this: And when you confessed Jesus in that group they kicked you out! This is stated explicitly in John 12:42. Many of the chief rulers believed on Jesus, but they wouldn't confess Him, lest they should be put out of the synagogue.

At the risk of making you weary with technical details, permit me to expound in greater detail about the Jewish synagogue.

The word "synagogue" is linguistically similar to the Bible word for church. "Sun" means "together" and "ago" means "to bring." Synagogue means "to bring together" and refers to an assembly of people. The Bible word for church is "ekklesia."

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It comes from “ek” meaning “out of” and “kaleo” which means “to call.” Both words are translated as “assembly” in the Scriptures.

The Jewish people were separate from all idolatry. As a people they never again bowed down to graven images following the Babylonian captivity.

The Jewish people were very evangelistic about their faith. Jesus said that they compassed sea and land to make a proselyte (Matt. 23:15). There were Jewish synagogues throughout virtually all of the Mediterranean World. The fact that Jesus said their converts became twofold more the child of hell than they were, still does not detract from their evangelistic fervor. They were indeed very evangelistic.

The Jewish people did practice a proselyte baptism, and this baptism was only by immersion.

The Jewish people did meet every week to study the Scriptures. They met, however, on the sabbath, or the seventh day of the week, while Christians assembled on the first day of the week (Acts 20:7).

The Jewish people did have elders and deacons in their synagogues, and the qualifications of these men are remarkably similar to those qualifications for elders and deacons in the New Testament Church.

The Jewish people did pay their tithes and offerings and even sounded trumpets to announce their generosity.

Women were not allowed to teach in the synagogues nor to usurp authority over a man.

The Jewish community did place a great emphasis on prayer, and some even stood out on the street corners and prayed to be seen of men.

An outward comparison between the church and the synagogue reveals that there were many external similarities. The early Christians did virtually all of these things which were commonplace in the synagogue.

Yet, Jesus taught that to attempt to mix these two into one would be like putting new wine in old skins, or new cloth in an old garment (Matt. 9:14-17). The two systems of religion were not compatible.

The difference was not so much something external, but something internal. The Christians possessed a power which was not available to the unconverted Jews in the synagogue.

POWER AND LOVE

On the night of His betrayal, Jesus instructed His disciples,

A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another (John 13:34-35).

It is significant to remember that at the time Jesus taught His disciples this lesson, they were arguing about which of them would be the greatest. He even had girded Himself about with a towel and washed their feet. After three years of teaching and training, however, they still lacked the power to love one another.

Jesus, therefore, taught them that it was expedient for them that He go away. As long as Jesus was in the flesh, He could only be one place at a time. If He was in Capernaum, He could not also be in Caesarea or Jerusalem.

When He became a Spirit, however, He would be able to be everywhere at the same time.

Jesus promised that He would not leave His disciples like orphans; he would go away to the Father and then He would return as a "comforter" or "helper." They would receive "power" after the Holy Spirit came upon them (Acts 1:8).

The word which Jesus used to describe the Holy Spirit is "paraklesis" and literally means someone whom you call along side to help. "Para" means "beside" and "kaleo" means "to call."

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Jesus, by means of His Spirit, would come to His disciples and give them help and power to live the Christian life.

The primary work of the Spirit is not something external but something internal. We are not to be "conformed" but "transformed." The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, and temperance (Gal. 5:22-23). The Holy Spirit does not pressure us from without, but He transforms us from within.

When we "abide" in Jesus we draw from His power like a branch draws strength from the vine. Inasmuch as "fruit" is the outward expression of the inward nature, we manifest a new nature when we abide in Jesus.

It is not the outward form of our assemblies that convinces the world that we belong to Jesus . . . it is the transformation of our natures from within.

"By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples," said Jesus, "if ye have love one to another." This is the miracle of power which the world is waiting to see.

Virtually every nation on the face of the earth is torn by internal dissension. We are divided racially, socially, politically, economically, and religiously. But the power of the Spirit transforms us to be like Jesus. His power enables us to pray for those who spitefully use us and persecute us. We call upon God to forgive those who drive cruel nails into our hands and feet. We would rather suffer ourselves to be defrauded than to bring about disharmony and dissension in the precious Body of Jesus. We are known by our love!

EVANGELISM

When the focus is on "form" evangelism takes on an intellectual flavor. You have to roll up your intellectual sleeves and convince the skeptic that you have the right "form." It is something like a spiritual chess game. When the prospect is checkmated into the right position, he or she is considered to be the right kind of Christian.

I just had a lengthy discussion yesterday with a native of southeast Asia. He comes from a mountainous area where the tribal people are to a large extent illiterate and without formal education.

Our spiritual chess games mean little to such people. They would rather see a sermon than hear one any day. They would rather see the power of the Gospel transform an opium addict than to hear a theological debate on the meaning of some Greek word. They would rather see a singing convert set free from slavery to demon spirits than to hear a technical dissertation on church government.

The Mekane Yesus Lutheran Church of Ethiopia grew from 100,000 to over 500,000 in only two years time. A scholarly study by Lutheran researchers was done to understand the cause of such unprecedented church growth.

C. Peter Wagner tells about it in his excellent book, *On the Crest of the Wave*. The researchers stated:

We thought they were responding because we were preaching the correct Lutheran doctrine of justification by faith. But now we know that it was not doctrine as such that was attracting their attention. It was the direct power of God in their everyday life that made the difference.

An overview of evangelism around the world will undoubtedly reveal the same truth. There are 12,000 people a day dying of starvation and malnutrition. The masses of the world are uneducated and illiterate. They are not interested in straining at spiritual gnats or splitting theological hairs. They are not attracted by the thousands to hear a doctor of theology wax eloquent on "why our church is the right church."

They are not interested in "forms of godliness" but in "power"!

CLEVERNESS OF SPEECH

A preacher who denies the power of God today will quite frequently resort to cleverness of speech in an attempt to get

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a crowd. "Catchy" sermon titles are mixed with promotional stunts that sometimes become bizarre and ridiculous.

Paul sought to distinguish his ministry from that of others who would "corrupt" the word of God (II Cor. 2:17). The Greek word translated as "corrupt" is "kapeleuo" which refers to a petty retailer or huckster. It is both unnecessary and inappropriate for a true preacher of the Gospel to hawk his wares like a huckster. The carnivals may come and go, but the gates of Hell shall not prevail against the church.

Summon all of your mental and spiritual energies into one place and consider again Paul's words to the Corinthians.

And I, brethren, when I came to you, came not with excellency of speech or of wisdom, declaring unto you the testimony of God. For I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling. And my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power: That your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God (I Cor. 2:1-5).

A classic example of a con man comes from a previous generation and is found in the person of the late "Death Valley Scotty."

Scotty was a master of promotion and manipulation. In April of 1902, he walked boldly into a banker's office with two gold nuggets. He claimed that the gold had come from a mine in Death Valley. He gave the location of the mine as "130 miles southwest of Fenner." This actually missed Death Valley by some 100 miles. During the next four years, however, that banker invested some \$10,000 in the "Death Valley Mine," but never had anything more to show for his money than two gold nuggets and a pile of correspondence.

When Scotty would get his hands on a grub stake, he would "invest" it in the most unusual ways. For example, in 1905 he deposited \$4,000 with the Sante Fe Railroad to hire a special

train from California to Chicago. The only two passengers on the train were Scotty and a mongrel dog. He claimed to have paid \$1,000 for the dog's collar, and wanted to take him for a ride. Naturally, the newspapers were properly informed . . . crowds lined the tracks . . . headlines screamed the story . . . and Scotty became a national sensation.

One wealthy investor built a castle in Death Valley and let Scotty claim that it was his. When they installed the organ in the castle the rumor was out that they played the organ to keep people from hearing the sounds of workers mining for gold beneath the castle itself.

Scotty's fame became his undoing. His estranged wife read about him in the papers. She had not received support from him in years and took him to court assuming that he was rich. She was wrong! It was all a scam. He was a fraud. There was a lot of smoke, but no fire.

All Scotty had to offer was "cleverness of speech" . . . there was no substance to his remarks. He was a master at promotion . . . but he had no power. He could get a crowd . . . but he had to use the methods of a huckster to do so.

We are today in the midst of a worldwide revival, and the substance of that revival is not "cleverness of speech" as our next chapter will point out.

God is not just a great God of yesterday . . . and a great God of tomorrow . . . He is a great God today!

THOUGHT QUESTIONS FOR CHAPTER VIII

1. How did Paul's preaching involve "power" instead of "cleverness of speech"?
2. Would Paul use the same approach if he were preaching in the 20th century?
3. Is it wrong for a church to use contests to grow? Should it be necessary?

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4. Was Paul's comparison of Macedonia and Achaia in II Corinthians 9 like a contest?
5. Some say, "What you win them with is what you win them to." Discuss!
6. Will we be judged by God as individuals . . . or groups? (See Rev. 2:18-29.)
7. How did the First Century Church differ from the Jewish synagogue?
8. How does the Holy Spirit produce "fruit" in our lives?
9. How can we achieve "power" in our ministry?
10. How would this "power" help us to do God's work?