

A Church without a Pastor? Isn't that Blasphemous?

by William Martin

"Wait a minute," he said with obvious surprise on his face, "You say the church where you worship doesn't have a pastor, and the congregation doesn't really NEED one? Isn't that somehow blasphemous?"

While that brief excerpt of a conversation might seem ridiculous to many readers, I understood what my old acquaintance was implying with his wry sarcasm by his oddly put question. He and I both knew that there was nothing blasphemous about it, but we once knew some men who would have claimed that, somehow, it was. He and I had, years before, attended the same local congregation of a much larger and well-funded church that had a strong "top-down" management paradigm. The men who were in positions of authority in that institution insisted that it was operated as a model of God's organization structure and management style. This concept was often referred to as "church government", two words that I prefer, for now, to keep separate. Well, I personally didn't have a problem with such an authority structure back when I was benefitting from it as a common member, so I didn't question or challenge the claim of God's endorsement for such "government". I had never suffered any mistreatment or threat of being disfellowshipped by ministers or elders, about which I had heard others nervously warn in whispers, so I didn't feel that I could fairly form an opinion about an organization's administration based on only one side of the story.

Several years ago, when my work took me back to the region where I had previously lived, and where I had known the gentleman mentioned above, much had changed in the lives of people who had once been told that they were part of "God's only true church on Earth." I recognized this old acquaintance of mine while working at a large construction site and I took a few minutes to catch up with him about where he and I were in our spiritual journeys after all of the previous years of turmoil. He told me how he had stayed with that original church group, and went along with many changes as they were gradually implemented. I politely kept my opinion about that to myself. But I shared with him how I had visited and explored several other groups, movements, and organizations that had broken away from that once larger church where we had first met each other. And I explained that the congregation that I eventually found and with which I took refuge was a small, independent collection of misfits who had a habit of asking inconvenient questions. Many of them had long before been disfellowshipped from various churches for visiting the wrong feast sites, or attending Bible studies led by subversives, or harboring dissident opinions about officially endorsed doctrines

they thought seemed discordant with the majority of scripture. These people were reputed to be dangerous spiritual desperados, disguised as friendly, courteous, happy, well-adjusted amateur Bible scholars. Nearly none of them had ever been well-connected to the "right" people in that former church organization. Some were never associated with that former group at all.

I further explained to my old acquaintance how this small church congregation ended up without a pastor, and eventually found that they could make do without one. The congregation had a pastor for more than 10 years after they formed as a small, independent church. But, as I said before, the members kept asking pesky questions -- hard questions about scripture and doctrines. Those questions tended to carry an implication that maybe certain doctrines that were supposed to be rock solid, had perhaps been founded on some rather shaky human presumptions. Well, that line of reasoning and questioning apparently became too much for a properly trained pastor to tolerate. (To be fair, this man had conscientiously and selflessly served the congregation as an unpaid pastor, supporting his family and himself by his own hard labor in his own successful small business. I found that to be quite impressive, really -- a model for pastors everywhere to emulate, if necessary.) So one Sabbath, the pastor of this rogue group read his own resignation letter to the congregation, and then left to attend church services elsewhere. We really didn't want him to leave our group, and he would have been welcomed to stay even if he had decided not to serve as our pastor any longer. There was, and still is, genuine sorrow among the members of our congregation that our challenging questions may have made this conscientious man feel unappreciated, but the desire of the members to examine and discuss doctrines and rightly divide the scriptures to understand the deep things of God simply couldn't be hidden or suppressed. The fallout of his unexpected resignation and departure was that our congregation was simply too small to hire and support a full-time minister. Besides, it was obvious that no other professional pastor trained under the same ministerial school would put up with those same pesky and inconvenient questions.

At first, some members of that congregation thought that a terrible thing had happened. But one man in the congregation, who was serving as the president of the elected church council, confidently and calmly did what he thought was best -- he simply accepted the fact that there was now no man with the title "pastor" to lead our congregation, and so he stepped up to provide some quiet, gentle leadership. Even though he was obviously not gifted to do so, he prepared and delivered several weeks of sermons, providing an adjustment period until other members started to accept the same fact that this was going to be a small congregation without a man with the title of "pastor". Eventually other members came forward to volunteer to deliver Bible studies or an occasional sermon. That's when most realized that we were going to be just fine, even without a visible pastor. Most of the members were quite knowledgeable about the scriptures, and some were gifted and willing to prepare

deep and informative Bible studies.

In the earliest days of the "sect" that eventually became known as Christians, following Pentecost in the year of the Messiah's execution, resurrection, and ascension, circumstances of the day necessitated that small groups of believers met together to worship on the weekly Sabbath without the benefit of seminary-trained professional ministers. An apostle of the Way, while traveling through a region and proclaiming the gospel message, might visit the believers in a town or small city, and might also remain for a few Sabbaths to teach and baptize the local converts. After the apostle's visit had ended, he would resume his missionary travels to the next destination, and in his wake, these small congregations would simply continue to meet each Sabbath to share a meal, to sing praises and hymns of worship, to pray together, to encourage each other and share fellowship, and to teach new converts regarding the gospel message about the Heavenly Father's offer of redemption for humans by the atoning blood of His own Son, and about His kingdom of disciple-priests who would eventually help to govern the Earth at the Messiah's promised return. So today, nearly 20 centuries later, a "house-ministry" or "small group" congregation without a "pastor" should not be regarded as strange or deficient, but rather as the most basic historical model of a fellowship of believers.

Small congregations without professional pastors require, out of necessity, that the members share the burdens normally carried by a full-time, paid minister. Some members must prepare lessons or sermons and teach the group, and other members must visit the sick or elderly, while yet others pay the monthly bills and handle business matters for the group. Without an official pastor, the elder members must take responsibility for leadership of the group, make important decisions, and respond to individuals with needs. Such is an organizational model of a congregation in which many people today want no part, but one in which some members thrive.

There are some self-appointed experts on "Biblical government" who will denigrate a small congregation which lacks a prominent and well-accepted clergyman at the helm, and accuse such a group of being undisciplined and disconnected -- merely amateurs playing church. Well, after having experienced both types of organizations operating at various scales, my opinion is that what most matters about your church, assembly, fellowship, or congregation is not how it is organized and operated, but whether the individual members, working together as a group, yield themselves to the Father's guiding and indwelling Spirit, as well as whether they have love for one another, and whether they can share that love, together with uplifting spiritual knowledge, with the people of the world who need to understand what their Creator is offering to them.

The only Pastor that we all absolutely require is the One who bridges the spiritual chasm so that we who are guilty of sin can approach our Almighty heavenly Father, who loves us, but will not accept us remaining in our sins. That one Pastor, or Good Shepherd, willingly died as a

lamb to redeem us from our sins, and to cleanse us so that we can approach our heavenly Father without being consumed by the fire of His glory. That sinless Pastor, who redeemed us by His own unwarranted death was miraculously resurrected to eternal life by the Almighty Father, and shortly afterward that Pastor ascended to heaven, where He was glorified by the Eternal Father, and entered the Holy of Holies in the heavenly Temple, as our Eternal High Priest, where He is presently enthroned at the right hand of our Father, spiritually directing all members of His body, the Church (or Assembly, if you prefer).

So now I must recant and point out my unintended error in my report to my old acquaintance -- the congregation with which I worship does, in fact, have a pastor -- a perfect Pastor, indeed -- and no other will do as well.

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