

BACK TO THE LIVING CHURCH

Washington M. Noronha

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A DISTURBING QUESTION

If the book of Revelation were written today, which would the content of the letters sent to the present churches?

With rare exceptions, the evangelical and Protestant churches have turned out, more and more, into local points of social meetings, where take place regular and standardized rituals, on behalf of the praise and adoration to God, just a little livelier than the Catholic masses. The people attend to these reunions as a matter of habit, sense of duty or out of the need of social contact and conviviality with other people sharing the same faith.

The praises intoned by the visitors of these services have been characterized more and more by music, songs and praise addressed to them, and not to God. The musical styles of the songs are more and more adapted to the taste and the style of the current culture, revealing an intention of pleasing more who hears them than the one whom should be dedicated the praise.

We have created, above all in the evangelical environment, a real cultural industry of literature and Christian music, on the pretext of praising and adoring God and to offer the Christian flock help and encouragement in their journey. The problem lies not in these activities in themselves, which are mostly spontaneous and praiseworthy, but in the abuse of the resources of this industry that, as every cultural industry, is more concerned with the profits than with the outcome of their work. The quality and the spirituality that should characterize these products are substituted by the sales volume, by the emphasis in the style and by the cult around the authors' personality, just as it happens in the secular cultural industry.

We are entangled at some churches in an intense ecclesiastical activism, a frenzied rhythm of internal activities, such as encounters, symposia, Congresses, graduation and theological information courses, destined to the noble, but almost always not attained goal of deepening the relationship and the man's knowledge with his or her Creator.

Currently, the Christian evangelicalism has been following, roughly speaking, three directions, according to the human nature, just as in the politics: One liberal, one of center and a conservative one. The liberal slope, is usually bonded to the so called "theology of the prosperity", which admits every sort of theological and practical innovations, destined to guarantee to the Christian the materialization of supposed divine promises of wealth and welfare, still in this world. This trend, has reached such innovation levels in the church so poisoning as to accept homosexuality as a normal condition of life, even among their followers.

The center theological line admits some innovation in the services, but it makes sure to hold to the Protestant tradition of submission to the sovereignty of God and to the Lutheran mainlines: *Solo Fide*, *Sola Gratia*, *Solus Christus*, *Sola Scriptura*. The services are characterized by the preaching of the Scripture, by the prayer and, in the Pentecostal churches, by the search of Holy Ghost intervention in the church, for restoration, for healing and spiritual liberation. It is interesting to notice though, that it is in the Lutheran and Methodist churches that the most liberal and controversial movements of the history of the Christianity have been looming.

The conservative line is quite faithful to the Protestant tradition, whether in the services, in the theology or in the praises. Frequently accused of legalism and fundamentalism, changes of any kind or disobedience to the rigid patterns of the church rules are promptly rebuked. In this group are also included some Pentecostal denominations.

Whatever be the modern churches' creed, what shows in common among them is always the same spiritual emptiness, the invasion of the secularism, of the ritualism, the search of the personal blessings and, in the best guess, of the blessings for members of one's family or friends. What happened to the communitarian and fervent church of the time of the Acts of the Apostles?

That church lived, in my opinion, what one could call a true Christian communism, where all divided efforts in the sense of mutually aiding each other, either in the material and in the spiritual issues. There were indeed the services, most of the time secretly held, which major objective, however, was of sharing the Christian experience, the mutual invigoration in faith, the study of the Scriptures, the prayer, the sincere adoration to God and, above all the spiritual intercession and the material cooperation among the God-fearing members. A church in that the presence of the Spirit of God was evident and constant, where signs and miracles were operated, by the authentic fervor, the fasting and the heart brokenness.

Would this church be definitively forgotten, the church which should be the model for Christ's true church, the bride that He will come to rescue when of his return to this world?

What is preached today, in most churches, is a false salvation, an apparent salvation, where is solely emphasized the grace with which it is presented and the faith requested to accept her. In the passion to increase the number of proselytes, the infidels are persuaded by the pastors to believe that it is just enough to mumble a "yes" to Jesus' calling and the baptism in the waters, to have his or her name definitively enrolled in the list of the children of God. They are not prepared to deny themselves, to take on their cross, to be crucified with Christ and to follow the narrow road, stippled of tribulations and trials, that leads to the true salvation.

For lacking wisdom and discernment and many times even honesty, those people don't realize, in their spiritual journey, that the true life conversion, as described in the Scriptures, is not just marked by a separatism, many times arrogant of the Christian in relation to the world, or by a mere intolerance, many times hypocrite towards sin and the consequent sinner's discrimination, but mostly by the fruit of the Spirit and for an effective Christian practice. This is clear in Jesus' words, which state clearly that not all who say "Lord, Lord" will enter the kingdom of Heaven.

It's also clear, above all in Paul's words, always mentioned when one want to emphasize that salvation is not fruit of works, but that is reached by faith alone.

It's Paul himself who affirms that we are saved "for the good works that God has prepared for us" and who declares, before the king Agrippa that what he preached to all, was that "that they should repent and turn to God, doing works worthy of repentance". The true repentance therefore, is not that which only produces remorse, but the one that produces conversion or, in other words, life change and, consequently, works suitable with this attitude. Finally, if it is true that a non-converted man's works

don't do right to his or her salvation, it is also true, as says James, that "even so faith, if it have not works, is dead in itself".

What lead me to write down this text are two questions that have been drawing my attention for a long time. The first one is: What causes so many people to raise so many objections as to being a member of a church, independently of its Christian denomination and another question, closely related to the former: What motive leads so many people to drop out of his or her affiliation to a Christian church?

On musing over these questions, I discovered that actually, a lot of people flee from the churches because they don't live an intimate communion with God. These people don't like to hear the word of God and they don't sense the presence of God in the church or elsewhere at all. The church has nothing to do with them. However, a lot of people stand back of the churches exactly for the opposite reason, that is, because they live a true communion with God, they don't get to identify, at the churches they worship, a suitable place to share this communion with others and to accomplish the works that God has prepared for their lives.

I don't have the pretension of pointing out here what is right or what is wrong in this or that church in particular, but as a Christian I can't keep from observing some lamentable evidences that show how some evangelical churches have strayed from the authentic Christian Gospel.

WHERE HAVE WE STUMBLLED?

THE WHOLE CHRISTIANITY

One certain time, when I was still a newly converted, I was in a prayer meeting in my church, when we heard somebody calling outside. One of the members of the group went out to see and when he returned, he brought with him a beggar, who was asking for food.

To my surprise, instead of offering him some food, this brother preached to the starving man a long sermon, followed by a prayer and a fervent exhortation so that he converted of his evil ways and finally dismissed him, simply.

His commentary was that it was useless to help an infidel and that without converting; he would continue to beg at the door of the church. This scene shocked me, however, as a newcomer I rushed into a thorough exam of the Scriptures, to try to find the biblical foundation for those brothers' attitude.

I have to admit that until today I haven't found such foundation. Downright to the opposite, what I found in the Gospel were exhortations of the very Lord Jesus, in the sense that we loved our neighbor, without any discrimination. For twice, after preaching to a crowd, Jesus didn't dismiss them simply, but He fed them all with abundance. How to forget James 2:15-16: "If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food, and one of you say unto them, Depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled; notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the body; what *doth it* profit?"

Therefore, I don't have faith in a Gospel made of words alone, but in a gospel made also of action and of solidarity. Action in the sense of being coherent with what one preaches in one's own life, and solidarity in the sense of aiding and serving one's neighbor. The Gospel is not just meant to the spirit, but also to the mind and the body and in that way, whoever preaches the Gospel of the Spirit, which is timeless, must also coherently offer help to the mind and to the body, which are temporary.

If God created and sees man as a whole - body, soul, mind and spirit - how to treat people as if they were just a soul or a spirit, in a partial way?

I do believe, therefore that repentance must be preached, above all, but also that, at the same time, our hand must not be shortened before the sinner's needs and much less before the saints' needs. Whoever preaches the Gospel must introduce himself before everything as a servant of God, before heralding himself as minister or priest of the church. Would Jesus' example have been other?

I have faith in the preaching of the Gospel of the Truth, but also in the Gospel of action and of cooperation, because that's what I have learned from Jesus' life, who fully lived up to his message, who looked for to heal people as a whole and not just to console the soul or to save the spirit.

ELITISM

Many Protestant and Evangelical churches today, are private property of the wealthy classes and of well-off men. Now, the house of God is not exclusive place of any particular social class or of church members alone, who meet there in pre-scheduled days and hours, as in a social club.

A while ago, in a catechism group in the church, one of the participants, a newcomer, lamented a fact that occurred with her husband, who had been kept from entering the church to seek her, for he had an urgent question to discuss with her, on the alleged reason of not being appropriately dressed. According to her, he was returning from his work and therefore he was dressed as a worker. This fact, turned out in one of the motives that took her to leave that church.

I am not pleading that we should admit in the pews every sort of beggars, prostitutes and junkies, sitting side by side with members of the church. I think though that the church should not close its doors to whomever knocks outside, asking for help and aid, what requires the creation and maintenance of specific ministries for this purpose. It is not about diminishing the church role to a simple matter of social or material care, but the church should be above all a safe haven, where the desperate can find the food, the comfort and the cure, so much for the body as for the soul. It's just not enough to eventually set about regular voluntary groups that rally to preach the Gospel downtown and to pray for the beggars and prostitutes in the streets. The church needs to be open for the lost. Wasn't for their rescue Christ came for?

It is necessary that precautions should be taken regarding some people who seek the church, on the pretext of getting aid. Some people have a hardened heart and are full of iniquity and they really don't seek the church with a worthy purpose. However, the excessive concern with this type of people has been transforming the church in a spiritual elite's stronghold, totally divorced of its universal objective. When Paul preached that the Christian and the church should live separate from the world, certainly it was not exactly that what he had in mind.

In a small Baptist church I attended in Belo Horizonte, there was a ministry that was assigned of keeping the doors of the church open over lunch time. In the front gate, a plate was put, inviting the passing-by people to enter and hear the word of God. It was in one of those hours that I decided to go inside that church and soon after became a regular member.

From a 2005 statistics, it was found that 85 percent of the churches in the United States have lagging or declining attendance. That's approximately 340,000 churches. In other words, 340,000 churches needed a turnaround. Christianity Today magazine conducted a thorough study involving 31 of those churches that had witnessed a turnaround in attendance, finances, purpose, and/or spirit to participate.

At the end of this study, five churches were selected to present their testimony on how the changes took place. I was not surprised to check out that all the five congregations had taken the same road in order to find their way to be a living church. That road was, in all cases, one that led the church to meet the needs of their communities, to develop ministries of service providing spiritual, material and emotional support to the community around them. (1)

It's becoming increasingly common the church-without-walls model. It's an open church, not turned inwards, to its selected members, but outwards, to the community around it. One of the churches which has adopted that model, in Washington D.C., went so far as to call itself a street church, in other words, it doesn't possess a temple of its own. They meet at theaters, subway stops and wherever there is a considerable flow of people. The evangelistic crusades are held in public squares, bus stops and parking lots. With this, those God workers have been reaching people that live distant of God because of

personal restrictions, prejudices or past frustrations related to the instituted churches. Jesus also preached in the temple, but most of his ministry was done in the streets, in the fields, close to those marginalized and to the lost.

One certain time, I witnessed in a Catholic denomination program on the TV, an account of a paralytic youth, who had converted to Catholicism. The history of this youth illustrates well and also exposes the central problem of the current Evangelicalism. This young man suffered for not having anyone to aid him, for few things could he do by himself, besides disposing of very little resources. According to him, several religious groups approached him to offer help: Catholic, spiritualists and evangelical. Of these, the ones he least valued were the evangelicals, which, according to him, only offered prayers and biblical teaching, but they didn't dispose to aid him not even with his physical difficulties. Differently of the others, which besides the spiritual comfort, also had helped him both materially and with his basic needs.

The Evangelical and Protestant Christians, in general, show a tendency to avoid to dirty their hands with the marginalized and to get involved with the troubles of the homes in darkness. They prefer to intercede for them in prayer, in the comfort of their own homes and of their churches. Not that this is not necessary or that is not effective when done in earnest, but serving the neighbor involves much more than this. One of my mother's frequent complaints - she was a Catholic and later converted to a religion called Spiritism - before giving her life to Christ, was that the "believers", as she called them, were mostly lazy and totally contrary to the idea of disposing themselves for personal help, or of "putting the hands on the mass" to aid people. Of course she generalized, for the true Christian doesn't actually act like this, but that was the reality she saw around her.

During the time I served as volunteer to some public institutions, I noticed the colleagues' natural preference for the day-cares. Few of them disposed to work at the slums, in the asylums and hospitals. However, it is dirt right in those places, where nobody likes to go, that live those who Jesus is looking for, those he wants us to help him to reach. During the time I served in slums, I could feel how strongly these people are in need of help and both material and spiritual orientation, and also the sheer dimension of their material, emotional and spiritual absolute poverty condition.

It is precisely in this life condition into which are buried the marginalized, the sick and the elderly, of physical, mental and emotional weakness, that Christ's calling can be heard in their hearts. It is of no surprise, therefore, that most of the Evangelical Christians come from this class of people. They convert to Jesus, not for being ignorant or careless, as many criticize, but above all because their soul is fully open for God.

In this sense, Evangelicalism has truly been accomplishing the work of God and has built itself as the true Christian church, because it is able to reach, through the word of God, Christ's true flock. However, it fails miserably in herding this flock.

CORPORATISM

We find today at the Evangelical and Protestant churches, a strong corporate structure, almost as rigid as that found at the Catholic Church. Obviously, it is necessary the existence of an administrative structure for the secular organization of the church and also for its spiritual direction.

However, that hierarchy and the way it's constituted has been causing disputes and disagreements inside the churches and, more serious than this, it has been promoting a type of idolatry addressed to the figure of their more outstanding members, which happens, in some cases, to be similar to the Catholics' cult to their ecclesiastical authorities and their miracle-maker saints.

The main point is that this hierarchical structure of organization of the Evangelical and Protestant churches, in general, has been building a corporative centeredness that turns them more concerned with their own preservation and their specific rules than with their main activity.

On behalf of a religious zeal of the integrity and fidelity of the doctrine adopted in the denominations, the pastors forget that what they can do on their own for the work of God is much less than what could be accomplished if they developed and sent off disciples. Often I see the pastor of a church traveling to participate in services and administrative appointments in other churches, when he could be substituted at those tasks by a competent disciple. I believe that this is mostly due to a flourishing culture among the Evangelical and Protestant, of worshipping the leaders of higher prominence and charisma.

Jesus, himself showed this example, when forming, with so much devotion and care his chosen disciples and sending them off, in his name. In this he was also followed by Paul, who had so much zeal for his disciples as for the doctrine he preached. In other words, the Evangelical churches neglect the discipleship, that is, the formation, by the pastors, of disciples in adequate quantity and attributes, as the most efficient means to promote a multiplication of the church while institution and, consequently, the diffusion of the Gospel.

The current theological graduation schools and seminars are, in general, settled towards the graduation of pastors, through extensive and many times expensive learning programs. There is today an unfolding of the theological teaching, aimed at the formation of church leaders, with a not so deep knowledge level, however with the same purposes. The Sunday School also acts in the sense of providing a basic learning program in the theological doctrine of the denominations, however with more restrict pedagogy and scope.

Nevertheless, I see that the objective of the Christian teaching in that sense is quite limited, with a chief purpose of fostering the participants' edification and spiritual growth. Of course, through those courses, much new leadership is revealed, but the engagement of those leaders is just made within limited areas inside of the structure of the church alone.

CENTRALISM

In the origins of Christianity, the church didn't meet in temples, but in the houses of their members. It is not known for sure how those meetings were held, but it is known that there was full communion among the people and perseverance in prayer.

In Chapter 16 of Paul's epistle to the Romans, he makes recommendations and greets several major leaders (pastors) of such home-churches, known and trained by him in

Asia, including women. He namely mentions five home- churches (verses 5, 10, 11, 14 and 15).

The Catholic Church created a center-driven culture and the doctrine of its exclusive right of celebration of the service and of the doctrinaire authority, which generated the thoroughly ingrained notion in the Christianity that the church reunions can only be held in the official temples and must be conducted only by priests, bishops or highly qualified ecclesiastical authority.

It's unarguable that the celebration of the Lord's Supper, the ministration of the sacraments, as well as the preaching of the Scriptures as activities that demand high devotion, life consecration and spiritual knowledge, on the part of those who lead these activities.

Yet, Luther, when created the basis for the rebirth of Christianity, had also turned against this centralized culture of the Catholic Church, which delegated with total exclusiveness to the Pope and his organizational hierarchy, the authority for the exercise of any activities related to the Christian priesthood. Luther maintained that God is revealed to all who seek for him with purpose firmness, honesty and true determination to know and obey him.

The Scriptures are not a hermetic work, accessible to just some few initiates, as in the so called occult sciences. It is right that a thorough study is requested for a better understanding of the Scriptures and of the historical and cultural context in which the Bible was created. However, it is not necessary a doctorate or even a master's degree for a servant's of God training in the ministration of his Word or in the leading of meetings of members of the church. Or, in Paul's words: the Gospel is constituted above all of virtues and not just of words.

I have attended churches in that the domestic meetings were instituted and encouraged, led by specially skilled and trained leaders. The benefit of these meetings was thoroughly visible, whether as a means of evangelization, of the invigoration of faith, of fostering the growth and communion among participants. Those meetings are quite rich in the sharing of life experiences and knowledge, in the offering of emotional comfort and in the support to those who are going through a hard time in their spiritual journey, as well in answering newcomers typical questions about faith.

The "cellular church" accomplishes the purpose of God, brings growth with effectiveness and produces leaders committed and pleased in generating disciples. That is exactly in obedience to what God has pledged: that disciples of all of nations were made. (Psalm 2-8 and Mathew 28-19,20)

The domestic meetings of the church have in mind the disciples' multiplication and the invigoration of the church, so that the Kingdom of God may grow with spiritual authority and success. These extensions of the main temple take the church out of the exclusiveness of clergymen's drive and take it back the Christian community. The community that breaks through; that recovers its authority and assumes the individual priestly identity, restores the faith and moves on to accomplish the purpose of winning lives for God.

This form of congregation of the church is a great challenge, because it requires participation of all the parishioners and unleashes the layman spiritual authority,

although under discreet surveillance. The primary goal is to make a leader out of each member.

When delegating spiritual authority, however, it is necessary a certain care, because some types of infantile and egocentric behavior might show up, requiring all the community to be prepared. The success is exactly in the watching of the meetings with the learning leaders. Those meetings should be strictly frequent and the Word of God should always be emphasized. The new leaders must not feel forsaken, but always be probed in their heart, closing the breaches so that Satan doesn't hurry, going ahead, contaminating the heart. To make a disciple is an incalculable investment. It is possible to produce a church member in 30, 60, 90 days, however, making a disciple takes a whole life.

Those domestic meetings, in my opinion, have a fundamental role in the consolidation of the experience of the real Christian life and a powerful instrument in the diffusion of the Gospel, when properly supervised by the managing body of the church. However, this strategy has been relegated to a second plan, or even entirely discarded by most of the Christian denominations. This "democratization" of the church, has been mistaken by many church authorities as a threat to the doctrinaire integrity and an encouragement to the abuse of faith, to individualism and to the blossoming of false denominations. It is well-known fact though that some sort of problems and some lamentable abuses have taken place, above all in the so called G12 model.

However, disputes, abuses and deviations also take place inside the official temples, internally to the own hierarchy of the church, whether between the pastor and their ministers (Evangelists, presbyters, deacons) or among these ministers and other members, who carry out other leadership functions inside the organization. I believe in the cellular church model, not as an independent church, but as an extension of the main temple, under the authority and the pastoral orientation.

In that way, this congregation form is not just one more innovation among so many modernisms that eventually spring up in modern churches, but an urgent need for the propagation of the Gospel and for the spiritual shaping of a true church. An active and authentic church, made of sure and faith-strengthened followers, through the sharing of their lives in Christ and of the true spiritual communion, and not just composed of a great audience of spectators that reduces their Christian practice to a mere attendance to the Sunday services and to some daily minutes of prayer, that doesn't produce fruits and that can't really live out the Gospel in their everyday life.

SHEPHERDS WHO DON'T KNOW THEIR SHEEP

"I am the good shepherd; and I know mine own, and mine own know me" John 10:14

In the beginning of the church history, the Bible tells that the first pastors were itinerant, in other words, they visited their congregations one by one, in many cities, looking for to guide, to correct, to instruct and to comfort material and spiritually all of the people.

The Catholic Church, faithful to this tradition, divided the territories under responsibility of each ecclesiastical authority in the hierarchical scale. In this division, the parish is the smallest activity territory, designated to the parish priest or vicar. In

the country cities and even in the great cities, some time ago, the regular vicar visits to their parishioners were fairly common, whom he knew as his own family and to whom he assisted, whenever possible or necessary, in their own homes.

With the onset of the fast-paced rhythm of modern life and the territorial growth of the parishes, the priests have more and more returned to their residences, partly driven by the new countless tasks they were assigned and partly moved by a certain disregard to this activity, which certainly became quite tiresome. The face-to-face contact with the public has been delegated more and more to lay groups trained by the church and to the so called pastoral groups, which are actually the equivalent to the ministries of the Evangelical Church.

This same phenomenon of the vicar's estrangement in relation to their parishioners that has taken place at the Catholic Church has also occurred at the Evangelical churches. It is less and less common the pastor's visits to church members' homes, for several reasons, most of which of administrative matter. The increasingly larger attributions assigned to the pastors, regarding tasks in their majority of secular order, demand their continuous presence inside the church and out of his territory. The current pastor's external agenda is limited to trips to minister, as a guest, the teaching of the word of God in churches other than his own and to participations in Congresses and meetings, in the administrative extent of their denominations. The pastors of our days have of course their share of responsibility in this situation, due to certain unwillingness to taking on the task of keeping in touch with his herd. They frequently complain about not feeling welcome at many homes, of hearing too many complaints and of being forced to deal with ordinary and sometimes quite wearisome troubles.

Anyway, the fact is that vicars and pastors have been more willing to delegate the direct contact with their church members to direct or indirect assistants, moving away of the personal conviviality with the congregation. I believe this is not a good decision, for how can a pastor possibly guide his flock if he doesn't know his sheep?

In spite of all the inherent inconveniences related to the itinerant character of a pastor's life, I believe it to be indispensable this personal interaction with the members of the church and even with non-members, outside the church. The pastor's personal life should be transparent to the whole community, because he has once committed it to the cause of his ministry and, therefore to the work of God. The troubles drew from the fact of being exposed to common people sorrows, should be accepted *as-is*, as a though reality to face, yet this is the very stuff that God uses to foster our spiritual growth. As a matter of fact, it is this way a pastor needs to work if he intends to be truly a useful servant, and to produce real life changes inside his church. Otherwise, how can he really intercede for the people? Relying on information passed by his assistants? Reading the prayer requests hastily thrown down on the pulpit?

The priority order in the pastor's agenda is, therefore inverted, because the administrative activities should be the ones to consume the least time, and many of these could be delegated to his assistants and even to non-church members. On the other hand, the activities related to the spiritual guidance of his flock, should receive the higher priority of time and effort, because they are the ones that really count, for they yield fruits for God.

I recognize that, alike any human being, the pastor has also his needs of rest and leisure, however it is necessary to have in mind that, more than a doctor who

consecrated his life to save material lives, the pastor has dedicated his life as a sacrifice to save souls for God and therefore he must, insofar as possible, to adapt his personal needs to his work calendar and not the opposite.

It is urgent that the pastors return to their original role as spiritual leaders of the church but don't conform to this status, as bureaucrats, full of pomp and vanity. It is urgent that these modern pastors, who don't know their sheep, trade in their elegant suits and glamorous agendas, for simpler dressings and set off on the way. It is urgent that they take their crook and go in search of the conquest of the hearts and minds of their sheep and make sure their flock marches on through safe ways.

CHURCHES OF BLESSINGS

The major goal of the Christian life, truly committed with the salvation, is Christ. After Christ, the cross and after the cross, the eternal life, the Promised Land. This is the correct perspective of a life truly consecrated to God, as we are taught in the Scriptures.

However, we see a regrettable degeneration of this original Christian perspective today, produced by modern theologies that completely mistake the Scriptures. The Evangelical denominations turned to the so called grace and wealth theologies, are becoming more and more popular.

These theologies are grounded on the belief that God doesn't admit their children to suffer in this world, either for illnesses, family conflicts, demoniac influences or for lack of money. According to these theologies, it's up to the believer to ask and even to demand of God the fulfillment of supposed unconditional promises of blessings and prosperity in their lives, through a total engagement in regular church campaigns for this end.

Those campaigns, miserably, involve usually bizarre things such as cabalistic numbers like "seven weeks", "forty days", and some churches have come to the ridicule of introducing superstitious rituals involving handkerchiefs, sacred oils, letters, coarse salt and public sessions of exorcism, among others. Moreover, such campaigns are in general pumped by great sums of the believer's financial contributions, on the pretext of showing in so doing, a steady faith.

I sincerely believe that, of all the deviations happened in the midst of the Christian church, none saddens more the Spirit of God than the above described. When the Christian loses the central goal of his journey, he or her also loses the right direction and, therefore strays from the path of the Lord, although in a way seemingly fair, as try to make believe those fake Christian churches. The most ironic in all this is that one of those megachurches, which boasts an expressive number of members, shows, above its temples' doors, the slogan: "Jesus Christ is the Lord."

I find it unnecessary to demonstrate here how anti-biblical are those theologies, because that is evident to any Christian endowed with the minimum of discernment. It is evident that God doesn't want us to suffer, for He is no cruel father. However, the suffering and the pain are conditions practically inevitable in this world plunged into evil and corruption. The mistake lies in leaving aside the main purpose of the spiritual life to concentrate in wrestling the everyday tribulations. It is necessary indeed to face the

tribulations, but not forgetting that God is sovereign and he knows the exact measure about everything that we should pass in this world. Some of these tribulations are actually trials, and God allows us to go through them in order to strengthen our faith, to build up a faithful, brave and righteous servant's spiritual character.

God has never promised his children a delighted life in this world, free from pain and tribulations, quite on the contrary. God's promises of happiness and eternal bliss are spiritual ones, for those who have been proven worthy of inheriting the eternal life, in his Kingdom, those judged worthy of entering the Promised Land. Many are, however the ones who attend those churches of grace and testify having been favored with countless family and financial blessings. Harmony between spouses, thriving businesses, a new home or the latest car model in the garage. I believe that some of these blessings are really legitimate, but most of those who feel victorious in their campaigns should instead be worried, because the truth is that they have already received their share of blessings, in a material way, nothing having therefore to inherit in the true life, when they leave this world, for their own choice, for it's written: "But woe unto you that are rich! for ye have received your consolation".

The churches of blessings are popular, because they give hope to a dream rocked by most of the people, the one of just to being happy. The churches that preach the true message of God though, are not popular, because they speak above all about regret, about submission to the will of God, about the need of changing personal values, about serving and being faithful to God. This takes us back to the history of the fleeing of the Jewish people from Egypt, throughout the desert, when they complained everyday of the bad life conditions, of the water shortness, of the privation of their favorite food and of the fatigue. All the Jewish people wanted, during their journey to freedom through the desert was to be happy, but they didn't understand that, in order for that to happen, to reach the true happiness, they should before humiliate beneath the potent hand of the Lord and to accept their tribulations as inevitable, however transient, since they were bound to take hold of a truly blessed land.

The journey of the Jewish people throughout the desert typifies our spiritual journey heading for the salvation of our souls. On starting the journey and setting ourselves about to the path, it is necessary to remind, everyday, that our target is Christ, then the cross, upon which it's necessary to crucify our ego for finally, to reach the true happiness. This is the real proof of the true faith, the one of sacrificing our mean dreams and illusory passions on behalf of a real promise of God of full blessedness, of happiness and joy beside Lord Jesus, when we receive our reward.

PROFANE TEMPLES

When God chose the Jewish people to build up his church in this world, He ordered the construction of a magnificent tabernacle, where He would manifest his glory and where only the priests, strictly prepared and consecrated for this end would enter.

The Jewish tabernacle was the only sacred temple ever in the history of Judaism and of the Christianity. The great first temple, built by Salomon, was profaned by Nebuchadnezzar. The second great temple, built after the return of the Jewish people from the Babylonian exile, which glory should be greater than the former's, was destroyed by the Romans, remaining only a single wall, the Wall of Lamentations. In this

same temple, Jesus, about forty years ago had expelled, to whip blows, the street sellers that worked in its corridors, for they profaned the house of God.

There was, in all those situations, a common fact, that took God to abandon his people to their own luck, to their opponents' fury: Sin.

The pastor of my church in Ponta Grossa, preached a while ago in an emphatic and vehement way on Haggai 2:14, where we learn how the sin poisons everything that is pure, though the inverse process doesn't happen. The sin of a single person can contaminate an entire church that tolerates his or her conduct, with negligence. The pastor finished out his preaching retaking a theme quite common in his ministry and that is deeply linked to the this subject: the continuous profanation of our temples.

Our temples today just keep a pale memory of their sacred character, of a prayer house, where is invoked the presence of the Lord. Our temples today resemble more to ordinary public buildings, because they are continually profaned by the very people that frequent them and even by those who preach in their pulpits, or who play in their orchestras, choirs and praise bands.

Like our body is profaned when we prostituted, or the celebration of the Supper of the Lord is profaned when we eat it unworthily, the church is also profaned when we enter the temple to adore God or preach his word, having our lives divorced of the ways of Salvation.

God has constrained me to abandon a work I had taken up in Ponta Grossa, with a group of youths in recovery of drug and alcohol addiction, for a reason that only a while later was revealed to me: I had assumed that work being hooked to a serious vice, which I didn't get yet to curb.

If our sin contaminates our works, it also contaminates our adoration and our prayers. One cannot serve God and the world. That's why God is absent of our temples, yet many Christians don't realize that, and are surprised when they hear about a church which was battered or invaded by burglars or destroyed by some catastrophe, either natural or human. Our esteem and our pride for our temples and denominations are entirely vain, as long as the temples of our bodies and of our homes keep being profaned by conducts that displease God and distance us from him.

THE LIVING CHURCH

WHOLE MISSIONS

How to do missions coherently with the Gospel?

It is certainly by learning from the best example which is always in Christ himself. Jesus was a missionary, and his methods should be the example for every church that practices the missionary work.

Jesus' method was integral. It consisted not just in teaching, correcting and exhorting, but also in healing, in freeing of the evil spiritual yoke and even in feeding, materially, when necessary.

Another good example of missionary work in the history of the Church is the one of the apostle Paul. He was the first apostle to organize and to practice what one could truly call a missionary work. Paul was not also limited to diffuse the Gospel and to plant churches, but he also rallied for the Jewish saints' material sustenance, in his birthplace. He also cured and freed the people, wherever he passed.

I believe, therefore this is the model to be followed, whatever are the reach or the resources available to the missionary enterprise in any Christian church. In Brazil, it can be mentioned as example of authentic missionary work the one of the Committee of National Missions of the Baptist Church, with their countless programs of social assistance, education and chemical dependents' recovery, together with the many evangelization projects.

Also the work of the World Missions Committee, from CBB, is an amazing example of true missionary work. The 97 missionaries sustained by the Brazilian Baptists in the African continent, comprising 87 Brazilian and 10 local workers, distributed among 12 countries, have developed in the year of 2005, projects of high social, educational and spiritual impact, that yielded (and keep on yielding) countless conversions to Christ. Among these projects stand out the Tent of Hope in Botswana, the Rainbow Center Machava in Maputo, Mozambique, the Preschool Education Program - PEPE - in Mozambique, the project God is Faithful in San Tome and Prince, the School in Bafata and the Jam Jamma radio project, both in Guinea-Bissau, among others.

At the Intervarsity Christian Fellowship, USA, in a recent conference of NCF-Nurses Christian Fellowship, it was demonstrated the value of medical aid for the reach of people of the so-called third world for Christ. As example, stands out doctor Tracy Goen's account, who held a workshop and presented a plenary session on his work among the Fulani people, in Nigeria. He could tell how the Lord used the traditional medicine and the veterinary medicine to spiritually reach this nomadic people of Islamic majority, through the Gospel.

Another amazing example is the Food for the Starving organization, founded in 1971 by Dr. Larry Ward. It is an international Christian organization for assistance, which helps some of the poorest people of the planet in over 35 countries. Through programs of child development, agriculture support projects and others involving hygienic procedures and sanitary treatment of water, programs of health care and nutrition, education and support to small entrepreneurs, the organization aims to relieve both the material and the and spiritual hunger. It is backed by means of donations, intercessors' prayers,

children's adoptive patronage and short-term missions for volunteers, together with the long-term main missionary group, the Hunger Corps.

Many are the ones who criticize the assistance activities to the needy social classes as a form of perpetuating a social order of government incompetence in supplying services and basic resources to the population. However, only from the Christian point of view we can understand and justify these activities. We know that the world lies in injustice and that is not possible to change this status only by means of political strategies or resources.

The promise of God is of an entirely new world, peaceful and full of justice, which will only be possible however upon the second coming of Christ. Until there, what we can and must do is pray and show love and compassion for our neighbors, through social assistance activities.

It's a fact that the primitive church was a fully social assistant church, as showed in many biblical passages, such as in 1 Timothy 5:9. This was due to the fact that at that time, the government didn't take up this function of providing social welfare resources. However, it's not because this role today has been largely assumed by the public authority - at least in thesis- that civil society should exempt itself from the responsibility for the care to the needy people. There are several non-government lay institutions today that work out this task. If the non-Christian civil portion of the society has been widely touched by the social injustice and by the hungry people and has engaged in so many material help programs, much more should do so the living Church of Christ.

I am a member of a Baptist church in Belo Horizonte, that can be considered a living church, although no church can be considered perfect, since all of us are still imperfect, works in course. This church, however, with its over eighty ministries, most of them of social assistance character, with its whole missions program in India, its Growth Groups program which is their way of doing church in cells, home of one of the best national praise bands, which, however still performs for free in public squares, manifests what a living church can accomplish.

As in almost all Baptist churches, this church has among so many ministries one that I consider special, called the Hundredth Sheep. This work reveals a genuine concern of the church about their members and consists of trying to bring back to the conviviality of the church those members that, for some unknown reason, have strayed from it.

A CHURCH FOR THE YOUTHS

The largest difficulty claimed by the youths for their integration into the church has been the fact that they don't get to identify coherence among what is preached at those churches and what is effectively lived by the people.

The youths have, in certain aspects, a psychology very close of a child's. One cannot teach a youth a behavior that he or she cannot see proven in practice, what is, in fact, quite healthy. Therefore, some Evangelists have been adopting as strategy to draw the youths to the church, their involvement in community activities of mutual help, in

collective efforts or task-forces to aid children with school problems, in the repair and construction of homes, or in the cleaning of community shared areas, among others.

When this kind of activity is carried out by humanitarian reasons alone, there is a material and a psychological profit for all those involved, but when these activities are associated to the Christian Gospel, they produce, furthermore, the main fruit that is the spiritual growth.

I can't help weeping when I see the deplorable condition of most of our youths, entangled into addictions such as prostitution, drugs (whether socially accepted or not), violence and every sort of entertainments, morally and spiritually degrading. I know that this situation can't be completely averted or curbed, for there will always exist those who are children of this world and, who therefore will die with the world for they belong here. However, many are the children of the Kingdom of God trapped in these abysses because they were not shown the light, and can't find a way out.

A true living church, committed with evangelization, has as major goal, as did Jesus, to care primarily for the lost and misled ones and not in accommodating those who are already saved. It aims to looking for means of first introducing Christ to the youths, more susceptible as they are of being seduced or confused by the world than adults and elderly; supposedly endowed with more good sense and discernment. It aims altogether to looking for means of channeling the energy of these young ones for the construction of Kingdom of God and not for the glorification of material passions.

The most effective ways to materialize this is not just preaching them the doctrine and luring them to gospel music shows. If we want to create means so that the Spirit of God can produce true conversions, we cannot tell a youth we love God above all things and our neighbor as we love ourselves, if we don't show him or her how we effectively practice this in our lives. In other words, we cannot lead the youths to Christ if we are not truly Christians.

When Jesus answered to the rich young man who had asked him on what should he do in order to inherit the eternal life, He not just told him to obey the basic commandments, but also showed him how to show, in practice, that he was sincerely interested in the eternal life and that he loved God and his neighbor and that he was not just interested in getting the best of two worlds: "If thou wouldest be perfect, go, sell that which thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come, follow me.." Confronted with this eminently practical choice, that young man unveiled then the true nature of his heart.

Jesus also showed us, in a practical way, how He will receive and acknowledge those who are really part of his church:

"Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: For I was hungry, and ye gave me to eat; I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink; I was a stranger, and ye took me in; naked, and ye clothed me; I was sick, and ye visited me; I was in prison, and ye came unto me.." (Mt 25:34-36)

FOR AN OPEN CHURCH

We need to build an open church, a field church, a church that's really alive, active and effective in the accomplishment of the works that the Lord has prepared for her.

We need to break free of a church confined among four walls, prey to a religious routine of daily services, to a frenzied calendar of courses, seminars, festivities, what one could properly call a "religious activism" or a "*churchism*."

We need to go out and seed the virgin field, and harvest the planted field in a systematic and not just an eventual way, in search of the afflicted ones, of the lost ones, of those imprisoned, of the enslaved by the drugs and by the prostitution, in search of the ones that are undergoing trials and tribulations, in search of the ones who are pursued and oppressed for the love of Christ. We don't know exactly where our siblings in Christ are; therefore we cannot just indulge in sitting down at our churches and hope they will come to us.

If we serve a living God, we need to be also a living church, free from the legalisms and of the heavy loads of sacrifices imposed by ignorant pastors and leaders. Pastors and leaders who preach a grace of God that is according to the number of hours spent in prayer and fasting, according to the way of dressing and the hairdo styles, according to the value and the frequency of the monetary contributions laid upon the altar and who forget that, since the time of the Law, God is pleased less of sacrifices than of the obedience and of the honesty of purposes. Jesus reproached the Pharisees and the law masters about this error, according to Matthew: "Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone". And also in Luke: "And he said, Woe unto you also, ye lawyers! for ye lade men with burdens grievous to be borne, and ye yourselves touch not the burdens with one of your fingers".

It's undeniable the value of prayer inside the temples as well of the fasting, above all of the communitarian prayer, provided they are sincere and stem from a contrite heart. However, the biblical exhortation "pray without ceasing" means, before anything, keeping a constant communion with God in our day by day. It means also a continuous search of his presence, of his direction, of his help, of his forgiveness for our daily faults and a permanent thanksgiving for his gifts in our lives. Prayer, therefore, is a natural consequence of this communion with God. What use has the prayer and the praise of the ones who bow down for hours on end inside the temples, shout and sing in loud voice, when their heart is so far from God?

Christ has never instituted or ordered the institution of any organized church, ruled by rigid statutes or organizational hierarchies. His temple was the open field, the streets, the houses of the sinners and of the lost ones. His home was the home of the ones who received him with an open heart and in that way he instructed their apostles and disciples to act. That was also the way the church lived in its origins. Paul, who most spread the teachings of Jesus in the history of the church, has never promoted or encouraged the construction of mega temples or grandiose cathedrals, as we see today, temples that look more like fortresses, almost always closed, which became stronghold of a new religion and a place of doctrinaire formation and of social meetings.

Of all the letters Christ ordered to be written to the first Christian churches, found in the book of Revelation, the most grave was the one written to the church of the Laodiceans. That people had not proven to be true Christians, they were proud of their wealth but poor of God's grace. Those people Christ considered to be "lukewarm" and told them he was about to throw them up his mouth.

The adoration to God requires Spirit and Truth and, therefore it is something far deeper than what is celebrated today in our church services, because He is sacred, good, just, beautiful and grandiose. The Lord doesn't live in temples, but in our hearts. The Lord is happiness, renewal, joy, grace and wisdom. Therefore, the Lord detests the vulgarity, the ignorance, the formalism, the monotony, the vanity and the spiritual coldness of our services. If "where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty", there is freedom to adore the Lord, to glorify him with our lives and with our open heart, everyday and in every moment and everywhere.

We need more than ever to congregate, to be in communion with each other, to pray, to learn together, to celebrate the Supper, to glorify the Lord and to give him thanks, to raise adoration praises to Him, as our Father, but praises motivated by the warmth of the Spirit and not by the vanity of flesh. We need to share with joy our experiences and accounts of the manifestation of the presence of the Lord in our lives. But we need for this to be free of the routines and of the bonds imposed by authentic bureaucrats and merchants of faith, whose main objective is to glorify themselves and their own religious denominations. We need to learn to trust and to be guided by the Spirit of God and not by man. We need finally to wake up and become aware and assume our condition and our Christian identity, while individuals. But it is necessary to do all this in small groups, no larger than twenty or thirty members, to make it possible a direct contact among all participants and between the leader and each person of the group. Groups subordinated to the central authority of the church, but with autonomy enough to be effective and dynamic.

Today we live amid a host of more than 1.500 said Christian denominations, formally instituted and organized, whose main activities are to herd new proselytes, to prosper materially, to revile the other denominations and to defend their own doctrinaire principles. It's not apparent, to any lay person who stares at this spiritual chaos that we believe in the same Sacred Scripture, neither in a unique God, upon which we base our spiritual life and drive our churches. What is missing for our churches to turn from cold and pointless institutions to the true church of Christ, the bride that will come to Him when of his coming, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but holy and without blemish?

WHAT IS MISSING

TRUE CONVERSIONS

It is often heard, among the most frequent questions from Christians, one that's related to the doubt as to whether somebody was really saved. Before any theological considerations, this question usually denotes that the person with this doubt doesn't have still a real communion with God.

People who are in effective communion with the Spirit of God present within them, whom they received when of his or her Christian conversion, don't have this kind of doubt, because they know exactly their real spiritual condition. This is because everyone who really has delivered oneself to God and started to walk in His ways, is spiritually born again and his psychology is transformed, since the Spirit of God now lives in his heart, as it was once promised to Ezekiel: " And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do them." (Ez 36:27) and according to Paul's personal account: " I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me". (Gl 2:20).

The true Christian conversion is characterized, above all by this: by the real presence of God inside us and by our communion with Him. This communion is created out of the need that we feel of knowing him, of the genuine love that we feel for Him, which can be affected, but not destroyed, and of the constant need we have of his direction and of his help in our lives. Externally, the truthful Christian is known by his works, since we are not saved only to adore God but "unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them." (Eph 2:10). The tree is known by its fruits and the fruits produced by those really saved, in other words, reintegrated to the communion with God, are the fruit of the Spirit, in other words: love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness and faith (cf. Gl 5:22).

The doubt concerning the salvation condition, reflects a precarious communion with God, resulting from a fragile or shallow spirituality. The root of this problem is in the Christian conversion, which has been many times misunderstood and therefore, has led to a false attitude that hinders the true spiritual transformation. Although the process of the spiritual growth is an ongoing one, there is no doubt as for the immediate transformation operated in those who sincerely make the decision of following Christ in their lives. This attitude requires, however a pondered decision, fully aware of all its implications and it should be motivated by the sincere regret and for the firm determination of letting go of the egocentric attitudes of the past. Or, in the Lord's own words: "For which of you, intending to build a tower, sitteth not down first, and counteth the cost, whether he have sufficient to finish it?"

A decision of such importance should not, therefore be taken under emotional impulse or the ignorance of the Gospel, which are however the most common situations. In the passion to "win souls for God", many Christian leaders present a false idea of an "easy" and fast salvation, that it is summed up into walking to the pulpit and declaring, either in loud or low voice, the acceptance of Jesus' as his or her savior. No wonder, therefore, the high number of people that leave the church and the Christian life, in the first months after their "conversion." It should not also cause surprise the number of those who, although staying in the church and living a seeming Christian life, turn out to be actually false Christians or, lukewarm Christians that, in the best guess, are just

members of one more religion, which little or nothing has to do with the authentic Christianity.

Those fake Christians are leaven that can spoil the whole church they congregate with, and because of them there's so much distrust, prejudice and reservation among Christians. Yet the way to disclose those people's character is not the defensive attitude or the prejudice, but on the contrary, the search of a deeper communion among the members of the church. On knowing and letting be known to each other, the true fruits yielded by each person will be evidenced to one another, and through them will be disclosed each person's true character.

There's still a second opportunity, offered by the church, in that people can better mature the decision of purposing a life change: the baptism. In case the baptism is preceded by an appropriate preparation, in terms of the explanation as for the actual meaning of the Christian life in the present and future life, there's a good chance of happening a true Christian conversion. However, even so, it's common true conversions to happen only after several years after the baptism. And sometimes they happen out of the church. The chief issue however is that, without a true conversion it's impossible to follow Christ and embrace the Gospel, to live out the Christian life and to be a part of a living church, which is really the salt of the earth and that actually makes a difference.

It is pressing, therefore, that the church stops being but a fantasy, only lived inside the temples, and start being a daily reality lived at the homes, in the workplace and in the streets. Few churches offer the new converted the necessary support for the consolidation of his or her new life. In the most crucial moment of his or her life, the new converted receives in his or her heart the seed of the Gospel, but not the necessary care so that this seed is not stepped or stolen by the birds of the enemies of our souls, or perishes for lack of humidity or be suffocated by the cares of the world. This individual and personal help is only available in a really united church, engaged in the battle against the spiritual and material powers of this world. This essential help can only happen at an authentic church, through ministries of discipleship building, of domestic groups, of visiting groups that offer spiritual and material support to the newly converted.

PRIESTHOOD

Why God doesn't raises up, in our time, men such as Paul? The question can seem pointless, but it's essential for us to understand what Jesus expects from his church in this generation. In the origins of Christianity, it was necessary to plant the seed of the church and for that, there were necessary individuals invested of great power, boldness and personal authority, who were deeply committed, to the root of their souls, with this mission. For that reason were chosen the apostles, one by one, for God needed it to be that way, so He could accomplish his work, at that time.

Today, however, what He needs are no great men or great historical deeds, as were the ones of the apostles. What God wants from the church today is that it be spread, but also that it be strong and that it be authentic, through each one of their members. Jesus hopes each one of us cultivate and multiply a genuine and strong seed of the tree that He first planted.

What happens today is that most of those Christian sewers are only Christians within the churches and in the conviviality with others of the same faith. Few are those who live a true Christian life, giving the largest of the testimonies: the one of their own behavior in the day by day of the businesses, of the relationships with the friends, in the workplace and with their families. Many judge that to be a Christian is just to get a church member card, to obey a series of precepts, to dedicate enough time to prayer and to the church activities, and "to do good" to other people, whenever possible. Those "Christians" don't have inside a true love of God or a least communion with his Spirit. Unfortunately, they show either in their behavior, in their opinions or in their reactions, that they are but religious people.

The most pathetic, is that when those people try to speak about the Gospel to non-Christians, all they get is being labeled either "annoying" or "fanatic." They just repeat the same decorated clichés and they pass on neither conviction nor sincerity in what they say, therefore they can't present any convincing fact that prove the reality of God in their lives. They are Christian religious and as such, they typify, before who hear them, just one more religion, among so many. Actually, they don't have any authority to speak on behalf of Jesus. This is not to mention those who are so shy and embarrassed about their faith, they usually get along with people in their whole life span without even their closest friends at least suspect of their "religion."

If we are to draw and wish to draw other people to Christ, we need before everything to go ourselves first until Him and to confess before him that we actually, didn't meet him yet, but that we really want to know him. It's usual to wise people to carefully ponder, before making any important decision in their lives. This happens when we're about to get married, when we plan to move to another place or when we acquire something of value. However, most of the so-called Christians, take the decision of "accepting Jesus" in their lives without bearing the least notion of the real meaning of this attitude. How can Christ's church spread and be strengthened with this kind of members composing its body?

We need to be aware of this and to set aside a time in our lives to rethink our Christian life and our relationship with God. The growth and the invigoration of the current church depends on each Christian individually, for this we've been named kings and priests, we were settled with his church upon unshaken rock, until we finally get to reign with Christ. Pastor David Wilkerson, commenting Matthew 25, stresses all that urgency.

Wilkerson says when that moment arrives; those who haven't yet done so won't have time to develop the Christ's character in their soul. They won't have time to build up their spiritual resources. He will come during the sleep and they won't be prepared. They will scream in anguish: "I am empty, dry. I wasted all my time seeking foolish things. I wasted all my life in futile things; I've spoiled my whole life. The Lord it is coming, and I am not ready".

When the bridegroom closes the door, the foolish virgins were left outside, while they clamored crying: "Lord, open the door! Let us in!" But the bridegroom answered: I don't know you. That is a frightening situation. On that moment, nothing else can be said. No additional resource can be made. The Lord will declare: "the door is closed."

Here is the proof, in Christ's own words, that only the truly saved Christian will be included in his communion with the church. All who have based their lives on sin in this world, all those who have wished his name but not his love, will be thrown out. (3)

It's essential, for a true Christian life, a real encounter with Christ. Not to pray that an angel comes, in glorious light, to break in on our sleep one night and introduce us to him. He always comes to us, when we sincerely seek him, as He one day came to me, during worship, while I intoned praises to God and had my soul fully open, with a deep thirst of God.

This encounter is essential because demonstrates, plain and unarguably, that Christ really lives; that He's not just a historical character of great spiritual nobility and sanctity. This gives us the notion how we are loved by Him, and that He's really offering us his hand, his comfort, his freedom.

Although the basis of a true Christian life is in faith, the faith that comes through hearing and knowing the word of God, the growth of the Christian happens through the ongoing knowledge of God in his fullness, and in this sense, I believe that a personal encounter with God is essential as a part of this knowledge.

SANCTIFICATION

The ways of God are plain and perfect. To know them, however, we need to truly look for God, with all our being. Only then they are disclosed to us, in all their clarity and fullness. The human theology is just a reference to those paths, but it cannot lead us throughout them.

The Christian sanctification always escaped my understanding and I've always seen it as something out of my reach, while a human being, something almost unreachable, something like an idealization or a dream of God.

I meditated in Psalms 37, that says: "Delight thyself also in the LORD; and he shall give thee the desires of thine heart. Commit thy way unto the LORD; trust also in him; and he shall bring it to pass.". In my understanding, I loved God and had already given him my life and I didn't understand therefore why I didn't thrive in the path of sanctification.

However, when I really started to seek God, when all my soul desired to know him, then He taught me, step by step, to walk in the sublime, but true path to sanctification. God began to disclose to me this path when I heard certain time, in my church, a song from the Christian Harp hymnbook, called In Fervent Prayer, which deeply touched me, as if God spoke directly to me. That hymn says:

*In a fervent prayer, comes your heart
In the presence of God open up!
But you can only get what you're asking
When everything is laid upon the altar.*

*When everything is placed before the Lord,
And when your whole being he controls,
Only, then, you shall see the power the Lord has,
When everything is laid upon the Altar.*

This was the first step the Lord taught me this day, our being's total delivery in his Altar. It's not a matter of leaving all our dreams on the altar of God, but of putting our own life, all our being into his hands. Says the hymn: "*And when your whole being he controls*". This implicates a true delivery, to rush entirely into the river of eternal life, which flows from the throne of the Lord, and not just to walk in it, with water up to the ankles, or up to the hips, or even up to the neck.

Our life, however, is almost entirely taken by our jobs. To forget the burdens of the work, we look for joy in leisure activities. However, in that search, our heart is invaded by desires and by the lust and, without noticing, we go on occupying its interior with countless material and carnal idols, which come and go, along with our days. The pleasure of the passions and the idolatry exclude this way, for their own sake, the presence of God in our hearts.

To yield oneself to God, to give our life to the Lord, means to open our soul to him to be restored, to receive him and to recognize him as the Lord of our lives, to give him the throne in our heart and to recognize our total dependence on his grace. It means to seek in him the joy for our spirit and the comfort for our body.

This first step cost me a lot to take. How precious are our dreams, our more intimate desires, our daily preferences, our subtle addictions! But it's a matter of choice, it's always up to us to choose between God and the world, between the ego and the Spirit, and despite the philosophers deny it, this choice is real and it's as fundamental as the choice between life and death.

The second step for sanctification is the consecration. God wants us to be jars of blessings. We cannot live a really sanctified life if God cannot dwell in us and produce fruits out of our bodies and of our minds. And He cannot dwell in us if our heart is divided and we resist his Spirit. But what does this comes down to, in practical terms, anyway?

"Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven"

"Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that believeth on me, the works that I do shall he do also; and greater works than these shall he do; because I go unto my Father."

These words of Jesus are among the most neglected of the whole Gospel. A true abyss exists among hearing the teaching of God and putting it into practice. How difficult is to practice, in our daily life, these words... However it is essential that all those who have enthroned Christ in their heart, hear the Holy Ghost's voice and obey him.

How much room in our heart and how much time, in our life, do we dedicate to God and to the world? From this balance, we can evaluate our degree of consecration to God. The best would be it was possible to dedicate a hundred percent of our time and of room in our heart to God. But we are still human, we need to work, we long to get married and to raise a family and that takes most of our lives. Yet, even of the remaining time, very little we set aside to adore and to serve God.

If we look up in our agenda, we'll sadly check that little free time remains for God. For most maybe it is just those five or ten daily minutes of prayer in the morning and before

going to bed. Others might go a little further, and make the daily Bible reading. What consecration can possibly be in this routine? Is that all one can really offer to God as the fruit of the new life He gave us? Is that all we have allowed his Grace to operate in us?

The work of the Lord is vast, but the inertia of our daily routines keeps us from doing more. The daily habits of TV and literature, the concerns with the work and the cares of the world keep us from serving God and of finding happiness and peace in his adoration. Jesus gave us the most wise life philosophy: "But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well". However, we almost always do quite the opposite. We take good care of our interests and fret about tomorrow and the day after tomorrow. Yet we hope that, at the end of our lives, we'll be granted to enter the Kingdom of God. Why is it so difficult to live Jesus' teachings? The truth is that a few of us Christian people are truly like good salt. We are not light for the world, but instead, we have conformed to the world.

When I was young, I had a strong distaste for all sort of routines. I didn't understand how God, the supreme Creator, could have damned his creation to a life of routine and mediocrity. Only later, after my conversion to Christianity, I understood that actually, much of the routine and mediocrity that saddle our lives is a reflex of the own human limitations and of people's estrangement of the Creator. God is perennial and endless source of renewal, of innovation and intelligence. The forms of manifestation of the beauty and harmony of his creation are infinite and the human intelligence can badly evaluate them.

God gave us talents and talents the most various and has promised authority and power, for the ones who have faith in Christ, to accomplish everything he has accomplished and still more. However, though aware of that, we have conformed to the sad routine of our lives and to the mediocrity of our jobs. Our small world still spins around ourselves, around our living room, our workplace, our social club.

Jesus though, drives us sometimes to high sea, to the middle of the great waves, where we have to endure storms and the fury of the winds. Then, as a lightning, He appears from the darkness and calmly invites us to leave our boats, to abandon the precarious safety of our homes and take a step of daring and faith: He invites us to walk upon the waters. That is what to consecrate, essentially, is all about. To have the courage and boldness of answering the calling of God, to do the works He has prepared for us, from our mother's womb.

The third condition for our victory in the sanctification journey is fidelity. We gave our lives on the altar of God and we answered to his consecration call. But we need to be faithful to Him, every minute of our lives. This means to honor and glorify his name, above all things, above all human values and laws. It means to be upright, steady in faith and in the defense of justice and the Lord's name. Many are the ones who were consecrated to the work of God, but have fallen. Some got to stand up again, but others have hopelessly strayed from the ways of the Lord. All of us are subject to this fall and the Scriptures say: "So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!" Faithfulness however is the ultimate trial to all who look forward to salvation and the eternal life, and all they must overcome it.

The more we move on and produce good works for God, the stronger become the temptations and trials we are to face, and tougher the struggle, to the point of many feel like they won't bear it and are tempted to give up. However, in all these situations,

the strength God gives us far outstrips the probations force and if we are truly committed, we'll eventually win. Paul keeps being our reference of spiritual fidelity, along all of his Christian life and for this reason God was glorified through his life, his works last and its fruits are eternal.

Faithfulness to God is a fundamental condition for salvation and sanctification of all who have decided to follow Christ's steps, starting from the very moment they took that decision. The secret of succeeding in this career is but one: Perseverance. To persevere and to obey, even when we're bent under the weight of our cross, persevere even when we vacillate in our faith, persevere even in the dark nights of the spiritual battles and in the storms we go through, to persevere even in the face of the temptations and the offenses, of the mocking and of the contempt of the ones who don't know God. **Always persevere and never to give up.**

The more faithful we are, the more the Lord reveals himself to us and infuses into us strength and courage, the more we persist in his ways, the more increases our communion with the Father and the more we are filled with his love, with his peace and with his protection. Paul was surely inebriated by the Spirit of God, and he enjoyed a deep communion with Him, when he wrote, in Romans, one of the most beautiful love pledges to God I ever read:

"Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, For thy sake we are killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter. Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us. For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

The Christian sanctification is the *magnus opus* of the spiritual life, however it is not, in any way, a result of our personal efforts, but it is a work of God, only accomplished by his grace and by the power of his Spirit. Those who set about this enterprise with firmness and earnest purposes show, increasingly in their lives, the sheer presence of God in their hearts. They become jars of blessings, more and more able to love and of generating through their works the fruit of the spirit and therefore, able to build and to support a living church.

TO LOVE AND TO SERVE

Kenneth Hagin wrote a book (2) about the need of living out the love of God, like says the Bible, in the apostles' letters, as in 1 Corinthians 13:3 and 1 John 4:8; as a basic parameter that evidences we are living in communion with God. To live out the love of God is an essential condition for us to be successful Christians and together be able to strengthen Jesus' true evangelical church. Obviously this is not easy. To love our neighbor and also our enemies is no grace we can just get from God. When we receive in us the Holy Ghost presence and we start to live according to the will of God, we receive also, through his grace, the forgiveness for our rotten past life and also the power to overcome sin. However, nor the flesh, nor the world nor the enemies of our souls will show mercy in this battle. But it's with the sincere determination of never giving up this daily struggle against sin and looking forward to learn to love our neighbor, that we allow God to give us victory and allow his love finally to prevail in our spirit.

The Pentecostal Study Bible, an old evangelical publication, draws the following conclusion on a comment about Ephesians 4:14: "The truth of the Gospel, as presented in the NT, should be believed with charity, presented with charity and defended with a charity mood. This charity is driven firstly to Christ, afterwards to the church (v.15) and finally from one another". The order in that the commentator puts the objectives of the Christian devotion, demonstrates, although not intentionally, the mistaken order of values that guide the current evangelical church. The church, while an institution, is put above the individuals that compose it. Most certainly, the commentator referred to the church while spiritual entity and body of Christ, however, what we actually see is the cult to the denominational instituted church, as well as to its authority and the negligence in relation to the individuals that build it up.

Paul, however, in the verses 15 and 16, settled how we actually must foster the health and the growth of the true church:

"But speaking truth in love, we may grow up in all things into him, who is the head, even Christ; from whom all the body fitly framed and knit together through that which every joint supplieth, according to the working in due measure of each several part, maketh the increase of the body unto the building up of itself in love."

How shall we love Christ's church? What's the whole made of if not of its parts? If we don't take care of each organ of the body, in an individual way, how to grant the health and the growth of the body as a whole?

We have finally come to the central point, which is: We evangelicals need to remember also of the second major commandment, and not just of the first one:

"Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. his is the great and first commandment. **And a second like unto it is this, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.**"

We need at last to learn to know each other, to support each other and to help each other and for this we have to be in communion. Not like the children of the world get know each other and relate among them, but assuming our identity as children of God, children of a Father who really loves us, with whom we sealed a true and fundamental alliance to serve and to honor him with our lives.

It's almost bizarre but there is more communion and friendship among religious and lay persons than among the evangelicals, in their churches. What is wrong? Shouldn't it be exactly the opposite, being us a minority enduring a permanent war against the yoke of the world and against the spiritual ranks of the evil? The Christians should live together in a degree of exemplary communion, both in authenticity and depth. We should represent to the world an authentic community's model, united and solidary, through which could be proven that we are really loved by Christ and that we love him and serve him as well.

In time of war, the first social phenomenon to happen is the association of the oppressed minorities, forming communities for resistance and mutual help. We Christians, however, seem to move away from one another and consider the battle as a personal matter alone and not a collective mission of the Church. If in the struggle for the physical survival people mutually help each other, much more we should do the

same while in the battle against the common enemies of our souls. Jesus put it clearly that whoever wants be great in his kingdom, should be the one who best serves his neighbor in this world. There's of course a moment in that the battle is individual, consisting of tribulations and trials we must overcome only with the help of God. But even on those moments, the comfort and the mutual exhortation from our brothers and sisters in faith are of great help.

Throughout all the apostles' letters to the ancient churches, there are three constant exhortations:

- a) To be always alert against new "winds of doctrine" and against false masters
- b) To struggle against sin and the works of flesh and to look forward to bring on the fruit of the Spirit in our lives
- c) To love and to support each other, consoling, teaching, aiding and sharing the Christian life.

It's time that we stop being spiritual children, stop playing Christians, and establish with Christ a real commitment to learn how to best love and serve each other.

There is no church without the Gospel. There is no Gospel without love. There is no love if it's not whole.

Ponta Grossa, December 25th 2005

- (1) Back from the Brink: A Leadership Special Report - Leadership Journal, Fall 2005
<http://www.christianitytoday.com/le/2005/004/8.24.html>
- (2) Love. The Way to Victory
- (3) Based on the article: Christian In Name Only - By David Wilkerson; March 29, 2004

About the Author:

I am 54 years old, divorced, and have two children. I was born in Parana, Brazil and have lived most of my life in Belo Horizonte-Minas Gerais. I have graduated in Mechanical Engineering and currently work in the state of Paraná, Brazil.

I am a Christian since 1997, and have participated as an active member of three Evangelical Churches, one of them an orthodox Baptist church and two others of Pentecostal denominations, in Belo Horizonte. I am currently a member of the Assemblies of God in Ponta Grossa, Parana.

I have graduated from a Basic Theology course at IBADEP - Biblical Institute of the Evangelical Churches Assemblies of God of the State of Paraná.

I have devoted myself to the study of the History of the Christianity, Theology and of the Bible since I converted to the Christianity.

Contact E-Mail: wmontez@gmail.com

Blog: <http://doortochrist.blogspot.com>