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Co-Editor's Column

A Truly Strong Church (III)

Garland Elkins



SOME THINGS WHICH DO NOT NECESSARILY MAKE A STRONG CHURCH

Strength of the Church Does Not Depend on Large Numbers

Sometimes a congregation will boast, "We are the largest church in town," or, "We are among the largest churches in town," and even print the figures to prove it. Such does not prove that it is a strong church. To have a large membership composed mostly of people who are half-converted and half-taught, and who will not tolerate sound doctrine, will weaken and discourage the faithful few. Sometimes, it would be better for the church to have some subtractions rather than additions.

Jehovah did not choose Israel because it was the largest nation (Deu. 7:7). Jehovah gave victory to Gideon over Midian with three hundred men (Jud. 7). Jonathan and his armor-bearer were victorious over the Philistines: "For there is no restraint to the Lord to save by many or by few" (1 Sam. 14:6). When God's people were faithful to Him, no man could stand before them (Jos. 23:10).

Numbers are important in that they represent souls, and even one soul is worth more than the entire world (Mat. 16:26). There is grave danger that many in our day are striving after numbers for numbers' sake, and then to boast about how strong the church is. God does not measure strength this way. God desires that his children be strong in Him, and not in themselves. "Finally, be strong in the Lord, and in the strength of his might" (Eph. 6:10). The only way to do this is to put on the whole armor of God.

It is possible to use various gimmicks with which to build a very large membership and still not have a strong church. There are those who use (and seek to justify) the giving away of ten-speed bicycles, television sets, and even the bringing in of a helicopter in which to give a ride to the individual who has brought the most people to a given service in an effort to build a strong church. How long will it be until someone offers a hundred dollars to one who will be baptized? We learn, from John 6, that our Lord stopped those who were following Him for the wrong reasons, as

(Continued on Page 2)



From The Director

JOB, WHO WAS TRIED AS GOLD

When one thinks of the many righteous men and women "... of whom the world was not worthy" (Heb. 11:38), surely he must consider Job as near the top of the list. Perhaps few if any people have undergone such trial as Job experienced. Upon whom has Satan been so nearly completely unleashed, in all of his diabolical, ruthless, unrelenting vengeance [with the exception of the Lord, of course], as he was upon Job (1:12; 2:6)?

Yet, when James praises those great examples of patience in the Old Testament, whom does he name specifically? "Take, brethren, for an example of suffering and of patience, the prophets who spake in the name of the Lord. Behold, we call them blessed that endured: ye have heard of the patience [endurance, ASV margin] of Job, and have seen the end of the Lord, how that the Lord is full of pity, and merciful" (Jas. 5:10-11). And, when Ezekiel was informed how hopeless Judah's future was and how impossible their repentance, whose righteous lives were cited in stark contrast? "Or if I send a pestilence into that land, and pour out my wrath upon it in blood, to cut off from it man and beast; though Noah, Daniel, and Job, were in it, as I live, saith the Lord Jehovah, they should deliver neither son nor daughter; they should but deliver their own souls by their righteousness" (Eze. 14:19-20). Indeed, Job had stated, "But he [God] knoweth the way that I take; when he hath tried me, I shall come forth as gold" (23:10). And, come forth as gold, he did!

WHO WAS JOB?

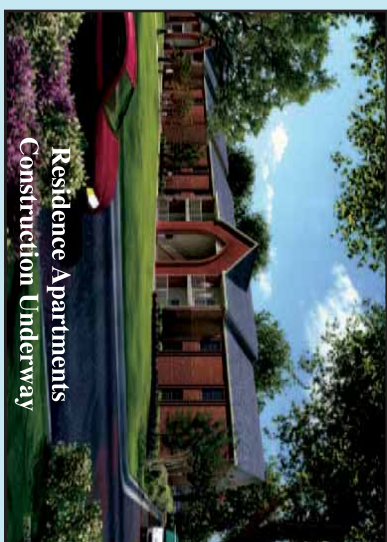
Job was a real, historical person, who lived in the land of Uz, a place east of Palestine (but not to be confused with Ur of Chaldea, original home of Abraham). He was also a patriarch; that is, he lived during the Patriarchal Age. Among the many evidences which could be given for the early date are the early Aramaisms in the language of the book, the over two hundred year life of Job, the absence of mentioning Jewish institutions and worship, the description of Job's wealth, the patriarchal worship and family descriptions, the existence of the name of Job in 2000 B.C. documents, the absence of historical events from Abraham onward, the early

(Continued on Page 2)

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(CATES: Continued from Page 1)

forms of idolatry mentioned, the description of court scenes yet indictments, the absence of a formal priesthood, the Sabians and Chaldeans still roaming marauders, the units of money described in early terms, Job's wealth described in same terms as that of other patriarchs, Job not chastised for shaving his head though it was forbidden by Moses (Deu. 14:1), the daughters inheriting with the brothers though not permitted in Judaism (Num. 27:8), references to the universal flood of Genesis, etc., etc. Thus, he lived in the "starlight" age of the world, not having nearly the advantages of the Christian dispensation, or even of the Mosaic dispensation.

Job was a family man, with a wife and ten precious children, seven sons and three daughters. That they were a close, loving family is evident when one observes that they celebrated each one's birthday together, and they worshipped together. The high value which Job placed on his children is indicated by their being mentioned first among his many possessions.

Job was a rich man, "the greatest of all the children of the east" (1:3). His physical possessions included "seven thousand sheep, and three thousand camels, and five hundred yoke of oxen, and five hundred she-asses, and a very great household" (to look after his many possessions) (1:3). Today, he would have been worth perhaps billion of dollars.

Job was a man of great honor, being held universally in very high personal esteem. He was the most highly honored judge at the gate. Upon Job's arrival, the older men would rise and the young would cease from talking; only after Job assumed the sitting position would his fellow judges be seated. Further, when a matter was to be adjudicated, "Unto me men gave ear, and waited, And kept silence for my counsel. After my words they spake not again; And my speech distilled upon them" (29:7-9, 21-22). Indeed, he was high on the "social ladder."

Job was a man of sterling character, a great man of God. God Himself said of Job, "...there is none like him in the earth, a perfect and upright man, one that feareth God, and turneth away from evil" (1:8). Job was morally complete in the Lord, unswerving in his manner of life, reverent and respectful of God and His will, and aloof from and constantly vigilant of temptation, sin, and wickedness. No wonder God "...blessed the work of his hands, and his substance [was] increased in the land" (1:10)!

God did not deny this accusation of Satan; He often blessed the saintly patriarchs (compare His blessings upon Abraham, Isaac, and Noah). [Incidentally, He evidently blessed them financially, more than He blesses His people today financially, since we have greater spiritual blessings than they; the spiritual blessings are the superior ones. The student of the Bible will observe that through the ages, as God's spiritual light and blessings increased, it seems the financial blessings decreased. One who gives financially in order to get financially has the wrong motivation. God promises what we need to sustain life, when we put the kingdom first (Mat. 6:33). Foy E. Wallace stated that if God promised greater financial riches the more one gives, the Christian would be foolish to place money in the bank at a certain percent interest rate. The higher motivation is love, and the greater blessings are spiritual.]

After having been so richly blessed by God because of his righteous life for well over one-half century [allow Job to be at least twenty years old when he married, at least ten years for his ten children to be born, and at least another twenty years for the youngest child to become grown, since each one possessed a house], Job thought, "I shall die in my nest, And I shall multiply my days as the sand." However, it was not to be. He would be destroyed "without cause"! (2:3). (Continued Next Month.)

Curtis A. Cates

(ELKINS: Continued from Page 1)

it were, "dead in their tracks." As brother McGarvey stated, "He had sifted them, for their false following could be of no benefit either to them or to his kingdom."

Sometimes, there are those who say, "We must use carnal things in order to teach them spiritual things." Our Lord took the opposite view. He said, "And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me" (John 12:32).

Wealth Is Not Essential To A Strong Church

Some are prone to measure the strength of the church by how much wealth its members possess, but our Lord said, "A man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth" (Luke 12:15). Wealth tends to beget pride, and poverty humility, although there are notable exceptions to these rules. When a church thinks it is rich, and boasts of its wealth, it is usually in the condition of the church at Laodicea. It said, "I am rich, and have gotten riches, and have need of nothing." The Lord said, "Thou art the wretched one, and poor and blind and naked" (Rev. 3:17-18). There is a vast difference between the way by which God and men value things. The true financial strength of the church does not depend on the amount the members possess, but the amount the Lord is permitted to use.

Prominent People, Highly Educated People, And A Great Reputation Do Not Make A Strong Church

The church at Sardis, a dead church, was exalted by others, but the church at Laodicea exalted herself. In the eyes of the Lord, both were little (Rev. 3:1-6, 14-22). Some congregations are prone to boast of the fact that so many of the "Who's Who" caliber are a part of the membership, and some members, in a multiplicity of ways, let their own estimate of their own importance be known. It would be far more becoming to remember that Jesus said, "For every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted" (Luke 18:14).

To the day of his death, the peerless apostle Paul carried marks upon his body. He said, "Henceforth let no man trouble me; for I bear branded on my body the marks of Jesus" (Gal. 6:17). He made reference to the scars on his body, there because of his faithfulness to Christ, and as evidence that he was indeed a faithful servant of Christ.

There are likewise spiritual markers of a strong church. The apostolic church is to be the model church for all ages (Eph. 3:21). The New Testament is our blueprint (1 Pet. 4:11). All congregations of our day are to be fashioned after "churches of Christ" in the New Testament (Rom. 16:16). This fact should cause each congregation to be a worthy example of what a church should be. This is no little thing which is required of us (Luke 16:10-13).

Garland Elkins

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BY LOVE SERVE ONE ANOTHER

Bobby Liddell

"For, brethren, ye have been called unto liberty; only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another (Gal. 5:13)."

The Christians in the region of Galatia had been called unto liberty, or freedom, as the American Standard Version reads, "For ye, brethren, were called for freedom; only use not your freedom for an occasion to the flesh, but through love be servants one to another." Their freedom had been attained by their hearing and obeying the gospel of Christ (John 8:32; 2 The. 2:14). Thus, they were free, but free from what?

FREEDOM FROM SIN

They were free from the bondage of sin. This freedom began when they made the deliberate determination to be free from the practice of sin by repentance, and free from the guilt of sin by obedience culminating in their being baptized into Christ in order to have their sins washed away (Acts 22:16). By so doing, they were free from the eternal consequences which would have resulted had they continued in sin.

Paul, concerned about their salvation, and knowing that some might reason that their new-found freedom afforded them a license to do as they pleased, cautioned them not to use their "freedom for an occasion to the flesh." Salvation in Christ did not give them the right to live as they chose, but did give them the right (and responsibility) to choose to live as Christians.

Know ye not, that to whom ye yield yourselves servants to obey, his servants ye are to whom ye obey; whether of sin unto death, or of obedience unto righteousness? But God be thanked, that ye were the servants of sin, but ye have obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine which was delivered you. Being then made free from sin, ye became the servants of righteousness (Rom. 6:16-18).

FREEDOM TO SERVE

Thus, the inspired apostle wrote they were "through love" to "serve one another." A number of characteristics, which formerly were not theirs, now should manifest themselves in their lives because of their changed hearts. The first, love, signified their benevolent and sacrificial love (*agapees* from *agapao*) for one another. The second, willingness to serve, flowed from the first, and signified their readiness to be in bondage to one another; that is, to demonstrate mutually serving together.

While love for one another tests the depth of our relationship with one another in Christ, service tests its length. Serving one another demands sincerity and humility. Some may feign to be servants though shallow and half-hearted in their commitment. When one truly is ready and willing to serve his brothers, he will consider it an opportunity, not an irksome necessity, nor a tiresome drudgery. He will joyfully recall the Lord's example as one who came not to be served, but to serve (Mat. 20:26-28).

Others may boast of their service even though its manifestations are few and infrequent. Such boasting is contrary to the attitude of service, and garners from the discerning appropriate disdain. Too many have forgotten, or ignored, our Lord's admonition for His followers not to seek to be seen of men (Mat. 6). Let our service be without announcement or acclaim, but to the glory of God (Mat. 5:16).

FREEDOM FROM SELFISHNESS

Love will motivate mutual service among brethren. Reciprocity eliminates the malevolent query: "What can you do to serve me?" Such an ungodly question springs from the lips of the lazy, lacking a heart of love; from the selfish, thinking only of themselves; and, from the willfully ignorant, rejecting the instruction of God's Word. It assaults the ears of elders, preachers, and brethren. It rings out in the assembly, and reverberates through the daily walk of life. It pants and thirsts to be answered, and threatens to leave when not carried on a pillow of irresponsible ease.

In this day of abundance, we have allowed the world to teach us how to spell—and the world spells service as "serve us." Not so with God's people who are freed from the dreadful, deadly bondage of sin to serve in the bonds of Christian love. Therefore, brethren do not bind upon one another that which God has not bound (see the context of the Galatian epistle). When we learn this, brethren will serve one another cheerfully and faithfully because they serve God cheerfully and faithfully.

In what ways can we serve one another? We can seek the good of one another, serving with a sympathizing ear, a voice of admonition and exhortation, an uplifting hand, a watchful eye, a shoulder upon which to cry, a back ready to bear the burden, and feet that will take both of us to where we need to go. We can speak the good of one another, refusing to belittle, criticize, evil surmise, gossip, bear false witness, repeat slander, or allow others to think what is not right; serving by encouraging, praising, promoting, and telling the truth but not to our brother's hurt.

CONCLUSION

Love will look for opportunities to serve and will rejoice in serving. Therefore, if the biblical principle of serving one another sounds foreign to us, our problem of greater magnitude is not a lack of serving, but a lack of loving. Love makes service meaningful, selfless, and enduring for the one serving, and requires neither praise, promise, nor payment from the one served. When we learn to spell service correctly, and when we mirror the agape love of God in our love one for another, we will happily be in bondage to one another, and will "through love serve one another."

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