

The Voice of Strangers

Neil Girrard

Jesus said, “My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me... Yet they will by no means follow a stranger, but will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers.” (Jn. 10:27, 5)

In contrast to this, Paul wrote, “For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables.” (2 Tim. 4:3-4)

These two very different pictures both stand within the pages of Scripture. How do we reconcile or even explain the differences? One group hears the voice of the Shepherd and follows Him, refusing to follow a stranger whose voice is different from the Shepherd’s. The second group *heaps up* to itself - *in the name of Christ and God* - strangers whose voices are much more soothing and stimulating to their itching ears! We must face the fact that Paul is prophesying against our present-day, modern churchianity!

How did the people of Christ transition from being (however incompletely or imperfectly) the first type of people into being the second type? We dare not ask this question just to place blame but rather to shine light on the intellectual, philosophical and even demonic trips, traps and snares that have caused the people of Christ to devolve into the apostasy, the great falling away from the faith that occurs before Christ’s return (Mt. 24:10, 2 Ths. 2:3) so that we might avoid and escape and overcome these hazards.

In the seven letters to the seven ekklesias (poor English rendering “churches”) in the Revelation, we also see this same progression (a study beyond the depth and scope of this article.) The first ekklesia (Ephesus), representative of the first-century believers, is said to have fallen from the heights of their first love, a love accompanied by labor, patience and an intolerance of false apostles – strangers whose voice differed from that of the Shepherd. (Rev. 2:2, 4) The seventh ekklesia (Laodicea), representative of the completion of the so-called “church age,” is the last type of ekklesia to come into being. Though there will be remnants and descendants of the other ekklesias at the time of Christ’s return, Laodicea will be the prominent type. Of this ekklesia, Christ describes them as wretched, miserable, poor, blind and naked, and “lukewarm,” fit only to be spit or vomited out of His mouth. (Rev. 3:16-17) This is the same transition from the original outpouring of the Holy Spirit that gave power and transformed lives (Acts 2:4, 42-47) to the time of “the last days” characterized by a mere “form of godliness” that denies the power of God (2 Tim. 3:1, 5), a religion so permeated by human tradition that, like the traditionalism of the Pharisees, it makes us impervious to the personal leadings of the life-giving Spirit when the word of God, the truth of the gospel of His kingdom and His righteousness, is presented to our ears and hearts. (Mt. 15:3, 6)

What were the heights of our first love? One of the earliest deviations from what we read in the New Testament was the exaltation of the bishop (Greek – *episkopas*) over the other elders (Greek – *presbuteros*) and the rest of the assembly. Paul prophesied, “From among yourselves men will rise up, speaking corrupt things, to draw away the disciples after themselves.” (Acts 20:30) This extremely precise prophesy was spoken to a group of men who were both *episkopas* and *presbuteros* (Acts 20:17, 28) and was precisely fulfilled within 120 years as by that time every town had its own bishop presiding over it – in spite of the clear instructions of Christ that “it shall not be so among you.” (Mt. 20:25-26, etc.) The dissident critic “Montanus was not

entirely wrong. By the year 220 [A.D.] it was evident that the Christian churches together with their bishops and clergy were no longer what they had been.” (*Church History in Plain Language*, Bruce L. Shelley, p. 89) The heights of primary love for and with Christ were no longer attainable. Even the Holy Spirit’s gifts and miraculous power began to diminish as evidence that something was not as it should be as *men* now stood over other men, between them and God, corrupting and even blocking their direct access to God.

The bishop was installed because of the various arising “theologies” and doctrines (teachings). The Way seemed to be splintering into factions and there was a perceived need for a visible unity. In other words, men stopped listening to the voice of the Shepherd and began listening to the voices of men. The Spirit-inspired gift of preaching was replaced by the arts of sophistry, eloquence and rhetoric (note well that each of these come from the pagan Greek religious pursuits of knowledge and “wisdom”) and “the traveling worker who spoke out of a spontaneous burden left the pages of church history.” (*Pagan Christianity*, 1st ed., Frank Viola, p. 81) The transition from apostles to bishops created intellectuals who had to choose which bishop and teacher to follow because these men had risen up, speaking a corrupted gospel and were drawing men after themselves and their own peculiar doctrines. Even when the bishop’s words were true and correct, as often they were, lost was the practice of hearing the Shepherd for oneself, replaced by the growing dependence on voices that spoke many of the words of the Shepherd with varying degrees of union with the heart and Spirit of the Shepherd. The dilution from purity and transition to apostasy had begun.

It is not enough, though, to just jettison the bishop (most commonly called “pastor” today) – we must first return to the original new covenant God made with His people. “This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put My laws in their mind and write them on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. *None* of them shall teach his neighbor, and *none* his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for *all* shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them.” (Heb. 8:10-11 - emphasis added) This *is* God’s new or second covenant with “the house of Israel” (both the natural branches and the wild branches – Rom. 11:24, etc.) that we (the people of Christ) were supposed to be living under since the outpouring of His Holy Spirit. Instead, with the installation of bishops and the heaping up of teachers, we have rewritten God’s covenant – and then we wonder why He doesn’t adhere to His covenant terms as we have rewritten them!

The apostasy, modern churchianity, has long since departed from teaching its adherents to hear the Shepherd for themselves as this is detrimental to the teachers’ ability to draw followers after themselves. But Jesus still says, “Do not be called teachers, for one is your Teacher, the Christ.” (Mt. 23:10) The New Testament still says, “But the anointing which you have received from Him abides in you, and you do not need that anyone teach you, but as the same anointing teaches you concerning all things, and is true, and is not a lie, and just as it has taught you, you will abide in Him.” (1 Jn. 2:27) The apostasy, modern churchianity, must concoct “theologies” that distort or dismiss what these verses plainly say and attack the character of any who quote them and expound their plain meaning.

What then of the teachers whom God gives to mature His people? (Eph. 4:11-13, 1 Cor. 12:28, Rom. 12:7, etc.) First, we must see these as *gifts* - they are not skills and abilities that can be taught and learned in seminaries and Bible schools and they are not offices to be held by men wielding “delegated” authority over their brothers and sisters in Christ. This gifting is only stirred up as the person learns to sit quietly at the Master’s feet and hear the voice of the Shepherd for himself. One who is inundated and saturated with the ear-scratching preachings

and writings of men – even men of the caliber of Luther, Calvin, etc. – are not able to teach even the primary and first requirement of the follower of Christ, which is to sit at the feet of the Teacher, the Christ, and to hear first, foremost and truly only Him. Second, we must recognize that the genuine teacher is supposed to “work himself out of a job” – and that rather quickly! The notion of an ongoing symbiotic relationship of dominance and dependence between a teacher and his following is foreign to the New Testament (see Heb. 5:12, etc.) and is as unnatural, nauseating and grotesque as a child of adult age still trying to nurse off his mother’s breast!

No, it is not enough to simply jettison the bishop/“pastor” – if we do not recognize the underlying paradigm, we will only replace the bishop with a man sporting a different title (“apostle,” “teacher,” “prophet,” etc.) but wielding the same, albeit more subtle and restrained perhaps, “delegated” authority he mistakenly believes comes from God. We must jettison the entire notion that we need anyone to teach us or that we need to teach anyone! A true teacher’s job in Christ is to teach the younger, less-spiritually developed follower of Christ to turn his or her ears toward Christ and hear Him for themselves. The usual objection against this truth is that “This will only produce chaos and division.” The truth is, however, that it is the exalted bishop (under whatever modern title) who is the one who produces chaos and division because he enables his followers to operate in the flesh (1 Cor. 3:4) and to practice lawlessness, what is right in one’s own eyes, in the name of Christ and God. (see however 2 Cor. 6:14) Denominationalism (sects, heresies and dissensions as they were called in the New Testament – Gal. 5:20) is only institutionalized dissension and disunity and is the secondary and necessary fruit of the Nicolaitan (exalted over the people, the “laity” –Rev. 2:6, 15) bishop.

What we need to embrace is the simple truth that Christ speaks one truth to *all* His people – Himself! (Jn. 14:6, 2 Cor. 1:19-20, etc.) When we recognize this, we can utilize a few simple principles to safeguard against the errors of modern churchianity.

First, **unanimity**. If Christ speaks one truth to all His people, that one faith delivered once for all (Jude 3), we must at some point come into genuine unity – first the unanimity of the Spirit (what He is saying – Eph. 4:3) and *then* we will grow into the unanimity of the faith (what we believe – Eph. 4:13) This will not be a unity of likeminded sects lining up behind the prevailing bishop or the current “man of God for the hour” nor even a unity of intellectual agreement with “essential doctrines” but rather the calm, quiet consensus of all who are truly involved in the question at hand – the unity of the Spirit preserved in the bond of peace. Unanimity, by its very nature, rules out the Nicolaitan lording over of the bishop, competing factions and even the simple majority vote! Operating in unanimity or one accord, with the leaders’ fleshly or religious excesses curbed by the unanimous recognition and acceptance of the simultaneously personal and corporate leading of the Holy Spirit *is* the hallmark and safeguard of the genuine people of Christ. (Acts 2:46, 15:22, 1 Cor. 1:10, etc.)

Second, **local**. The New Testament gives to the singular ekklesia the province of just one town or village but it gives to that province *all* of that one town or village. The New Testament knows nothing of commuter “churches” or of more than one (competing) ekklesia in one area. This is representative of the oneness that Christ calls us into. (Jn. 17:20-21) In practical terms, especially

during this time of rampant lawlessness, apostasy and division (Mt. 24:12), we can simply make every effort to include in the decision-making process all the people who are genuinely affected by that pending decision or proposed action. Since we are one body (see 1 Cor. 12:26, etc.), much more than we normally believe affects others. But if we use the standards of 1) who will be affected and 2) unanimous agreement about the will of God and the leading of His Spirit, we can readily eradicate Nicolaitanism from our midst.

Third, ***God's will***. Though modern churchianity, particularly in the middle and upper classes, has absorbed the gospel of Christ into its culture of self-centered excess and relativistic lawlessness, the truth remains that we *all* “who live should live no longer *for themselves*, but *for Him* who died for them and rose again.” (2 Cor. 5:15 - emphasis added) If we will submit all our questions (and questions of doctrine are often not as crucial as the combatants believe – often doctrine is only an excuse to wield power or take preeminence) to God's will as revealed to all brothers and sisters involved at that time, we will find ourselves walking in peace and harmony rather than the strife and contention of the “church.”

These three simple principles will safeguard any group who wishes to participate only in the divine nature though they will be a source of constant friction with those who have their own hidden agendas for significance, preeminence and power.

Let those who have ears hear the voice of the one true Shepherd and forsake all the other ear-scratching teachers who speak a word that does not come from the mouth of God but from their own vain imaginations that they have received some special “sacred anointing” they claim comes from God that now qualifies, equips and enables them to lord over their brothers and sisters by teaching and telling them how they should live and be. (see Jer. 23:21, Mt. 24:5, etc.) This very subtle strain of presumed better-ness and superiority is precisely the primary element that makes one's voice that of a stranger.

Jesus still says, “You are not to be called or perceived of as an exalted teacher, for you have only one Master and you are *all* brothers. You are to stand side-by-side and back-to-back as I lead each one personally from within. If My people – those who truly are My people – would simply understand and obey in this fashion, I will quickly remove those who stand in My way and block the building of My house, My temple. Soon enough I will send My angels to forever remove those who have defiled My house but for now I seek a body, even a small remnant, who will turn their hearts and ears to Me, and turn away from the fleshly sermons and carnal songs that abound, and be still and know that I am your God.”

It is time – first and foremost in our own lives and practices – that we tear down the high places we have erected for some man or men whose eloquence soothes and stimulates our ears and bow down once again before the Lord of truth, beauty and life so that we may receive needed grace and truly live our lives totally for Him who died and rose again. Anything else will be only one more variation of the theme of the ongoing cacophony of noise, error, deception and death that is the apostasy, the great falling away from the faith, modern churchianity.

Let he who has ears hear what the Spirit is saying to the people of Christ.

Neil Girrard
Paidion Books
P.O. Box 327
Capitan, NM 88316

Website – www.paidionbooks.org

Email – paidion@paidionbooks.org

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