

# The Torch of the Testimony

This is the last chapter of John Kennedy's fantastic book on church history, "The Torch of the Testimony". Hopefully reading it will inspire you to revisit what "church" means and what you part will be in making that happen.

## THE TORCH OF THE TESTIMONY

What has been reviewed in the previous chapters of the history of the spiritual movement of the church comprises but a small part of the New Testament witness to Christ that has been owned of the Spirit down through the ages. Eternity alone will reveal the full extent of God's working through companies of faithful believers, the memory of whose testimony and very existence have been obliterated by the prejudice of an organized and carnal Christianity which saw in die spiritual authority of the subject twos and threes an indictment of its own spiritual impotence. But what is the relevance of the Spirit's activity in the past to the attitude and service of the Lord's people in this the twentieth century?

The whole subject of the church may appear fraught with complexities, and the term "church" itself is used in so many ways that the inconclusiveness of its modern use often adds to the confusion. Yet Scripture is not confused. The perplexity which the subject arouses, arises not nearly so much in a failure to understand what the Bible says, as in a failure to apply what the Bible says to the general Church of Christendom. If we could but set the whole anomalous development of Christendom aside and begin with the Word of God alone and a mind to obey it, is it to be supposed that our problem would be just the same? "Of course not," would be the answer, "but that is just what we cannot, do, set the whole anomalous development of Christendom aside. We must accept the situation as it exists, and begin there.". Is that not the crux of the whole matter? Granted the chaotic fact of organized Christianity cannot be ignored, but in our seeking the mind of Christ, is that really where we must begin, in a prime occupation with what has been produced by an alliance of the ingenuity of man and perverted or limited truth? Should we not begin with the Word of God itself? Surely if the history of the church teaches us anything at all, it teaches us that the testimony, be it that of an individual or of an assembly, that has been honoured of God, has been the testimony established on His Word. All spiritual blessing and advancement begins there, not in an attempt to accommodate certain Scriptural precepts to an existing religious system, but in an unconditional desire to honour the Word of God.

It is precisely here that the failure of so much Christian thought lies today. The great bulk of Christian service in these days is conditioned by a largely unquestioned acceptance of organized Christianity as the church. The Church is regarded as a field of evangelism in which the Gospel must be preached and which must be revitalized by the coming of revival. The establishment of churches according to the Word is of little concern, and the effort to promote revival takes its place. Thus the preaching of redemption becomes an end in itself, and the full message of the Gospel which is concerned not only with the salvation of the individual, but with his relationship in the church and all that entails, is left half proclaimed. We are not deluded into thinking that the preaching of personal salvation is no longer necessary, simply because the spiritually powerless and defeated lives of men and women all around us often happen to sport a 'Christian' label, yet the existence of no less spiritually powerless and defeated organized Christianity has terribly deluded us into thinking that the preaching of the church is no longer necessary. The church exists, so that part of the Gospel no longer applies, we reason, when in fact, according to the standard of Scripture, the church may not exist at all, but only a name. It is apt to note how full was the message preached by the apostle Paul. He was, he says, a minister both of the Gospel and of the church (Col. 1:23-25). By no means did he minimize the importance of personal redemption as basic to the whole of God's purpose, but he recognized that the consummation of God's purpose was in the church, and to leave it out of his message would be to be content with only half a Gospel.

If 'church' is one word that is commonly misused, 'revival' is another. In the Old Testament, revival signified the restoration of a devotion to the Lord that had grown cold. When we speak of revival today we generally refer to some outstanding response to the Gospel, a receiving of spiritual life where before there had been death, usually within the context of the organized Church. It is significant that the New Testament knows no parallel to the modern conception of revival. The instances of a spectacular working of the Spirit of God as, for example, at Pentecost, recorded in the book of Acts, were of a completely different nature, and were essentially of the same nature as the Old Testament outpourings. To equate generally the spiritual experience of Jews and Gentile adherents of the synagogue with the conversion experience of those of a later age is misleading, as has already been pointed out in one of the early chapters of this book. The faithful who, in full trust and devotion to God, awaited the coming of the Messiah and joyfully accepted Christ as the fulfilment of that hope were not passing at that precise moment from estrangement into fellowship with God. The work of the cross was as effective before the historic event of Calvary as after it, and faith made it real in justification as the writer to the Hebrews reminds us. Furthermore, the revival of Pentecost led to the establishment of the church. We do not in the New Testament read of any such revival within a church already established. The point is not to decry or minimize the importance of any spiritual awakening God might vouchsafe to send. We thank God for every touch of genuine revival and pray for more, but it would seem from Scripture that it is something extra, as it were, to the purpose God has set out to fulfil in calling together the church. Revival may be a vital, contributing factor to God's purpose, but is not itself the fulfilment of His design.

The Old Testament revivals under Hezekiah and Josiah are interesting in this connection. Why is it that the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah who were engaged in their prophetic ministries during the periods of these great outpourings, so completely ignore them? May the answer not be that the heart concern of the prophets was the continuance of the stream of Gods purposes through a remnant prepared for the revelation of the Messiah? All that was basic to the plan of God lay there. The revivals were but a parenthesis, albeit a glorious one, in the divine plan, and their ultimate value would be determined by what they contributed to the stream of God's eternal purpose. The history of the spiritual movement of the church aptly illustrates what has just been said, and the problem of modern missions further confirms the view. In many countries of the world, the cry is that a church has been produced which is not itself productive. Evangelism, or maybe revival, has begotten that which has not the strength to beget. Redemption has not been followed by the church, and the result is spiritual barrenness.

In our review of the great revival outpourings under Wesley and Whitefield, it has been suggested that their main significance lies in their preparation of the way for the outstanding return to the ground of Christian fellowship and gathering of the nineteenth century. That does not detract in the least from the mighty work that was accomplished through the ministry of these two great men of God, but it does indicate that the ministry of no one man is complete in itself. It is but contributory to what God is doing through others, and all finds its full expression in the church towards which all ministry must flow. The difficulty is that the gift of the evangelist is much more readily accepted than the gift of the teacher. The born again Christian views with no prejudice the preaching of redemption, but deep rooted prejudice and traditional loyalties may often be touched by the teaching of the Word, so we dismiss the teaching that offends, hold on to evangelism and our prejudices as well, making the manifestation of the church impossible. How many of us have really learned not to be offended in Christ?

Evangelism or revival must find its consummation in the church; the church must be founded upon the living Word, Christ; the organized Church of Christendom, therefore, cannot be accepted as a fait accompli in place of what the written Word so clearly reveals.

What then is to be our attitude to it, since it can be neither accepted nor ignored? In this the Scriptures do not leave us without an answer. No situation is foreign to the Word of God, and before the apostle Paul laid down his life for his faith the declension had already set in which still characterizes the Christian scene. It is dealing with this very question that Paul wrote his last letter, the second epistle to Timothy, a young servant of God who was, no doubt, as perplexed by the prevailing confusion of his time as many people of God are today. The second epistle of Paul to Timothy is of immense significance for the present age.

Paul's message is succinctly summed up in four verses, 2 Tim. 2:19-22. First of all, he says, "The foundation of God standeth, having this seal, The Lord knoweth them that are his : and, Let every one that nameth the name of the Lord depart from unrighteousness" (vs. 19). All around may be declension and confusion, but the Lord knows His own people, and His own people know Him. The proof of their knowledge is that they desire to obey Him and live lives separated from unrighteousness. This sums up God's personal relationship to each one of His own, and their individual responsibility towards Him. Paul now turns to the scene of confusion, the structure of professing Christendom. He likens it to a great house containing vessels of value and vessels that are worthless (vs. 20). Here it is, the mixture that is called the Church. Paul almost implies that such a mixture is inevitable, but is it to be accepted because of that? "If a man therefore purge himself from these," he goes on to explain, "he shall be a vessel unto honour, sanctified, meet for the masters use, prepared unto every good work" (vs. 21). From whomsoever or whatever it be interpreted that a man should "purge himself" this verse leaves the child of God standing solely in his relationship to the Lord outside any Church or organization. He is back precisely at the place where he was spiritually born, knowing only that he is alive in Christ, and has to rediscover his relationship in the divine family. He stands where alone he is free and usable.

What, finally, is his responsibility in such a situation? "Follow after righteousness, faith, love, peace, with them that call on the Lord out of a pure heart" says the apostle. From the ground of our individual relationship with Christ we have moved on to the ground of the church, where the two or three are gathered together in His name, and He is in the midst of them. There is no detailed description given whereby we may know God's people. Paul's words, "Them that call upon the Lord out of a pure heart", leaves the transparent sincerity of the believer to be discerned by the believer. "The Spirit himself beareth witness" Paul says in another place (Rom. 8:16). It may be difficult to explain in terms that would satisfy an unregenerate man how children of God recognise one another, but the witness of the Spirit is a reliable guide. Human judgement may becloud that witness and mistakes can be made, but as long as the Spirit's witness is the guide, the question of fellowship will never be a problem. It is when some test to satisfy man's mind is set as a qualification for fellowship, by-passing the witness of the Spirit, that difficulties arise.

The separated company of the church will be characterized by four things, righteousness, faith, love, peace, all matters of the heart, not of the head. They all leave much room for development, and development necessitates knowledge. A mind applied to know Christ is of vital importance for spiritual maturity, but only if it is directed by a heart already related to Him. Righteousness is the obvious outcome of regeneration; where there is the nature of Christ there will also be the character of Christ. Faith is the attitude of complete dependence upon God and subservience to Him which alone allows the Spirit to work. Love is the outflow of the Spirit's life within us to one another. Peace is the satisfaction of knowing the Lord in the midst.

These are the simple elements of the church from which the people and purposes of God can grow to maturity. They are the elements of life, life which is reproductive, but to be reproductive it must remain free. The organization of Christianity has again and again, down through the centuries, led to barrenness. It has been when the life of the Spirit has burst the constricting bands of denominational organizations that the church has been revealed in its primitive power and authority.

The testimony of the church is positive, not merely reactionary. Doubtless, an element of reaction remains, inasmuch as the righteousness of Christ rightly reacts against the ungodliness of the world, but the separated church of 2 Timothy 2:22 is pre-eminently a testimony to the truth, not a testimony against error. It is a testimony to the truth that all who are born of the Spirit into the family of Christ are one, and must grow and witness together in the fellowship of the church where the Lord dwells in their midst. The church meets on that positive ground, neither adding anything to it, nor taking anything away. But it entails sacrifice. It means the taking up of the cross, the cross of misunderstanding, of shame, of being called 'separationists'. Yet every spiritual movement has begun in sacrifice. That is another of history's lessons.

The true church is the scene of a continual, spiritual struggle for its own existence. "Hold the pattern of sound words which thou hast heard from me," Paul exhorts Timothy (2 Tim. 1:13). If we do not hold firmly on to the fellowship of the church, it will slip from our grasp. It is of all things most vehemently assailed. It is tempted to compromise with organized Christianity. It is tempted to organize itself in order to conserve what it has gained. It is tempted to sectarianism by limiting its growth to a certain emphasis of Christian truth. When it succumbs to any of these temptations, declension follows, for progress has been limited, and when it has reached the end of its possible progress, it must fade out as a spiritual power. This is the picture that history so graphically portrays, the picture of spiritual power followed by declension, but from every scene of declension God calls out His remnant. The denominations of today are often the churches of yesterday. They each carried the torch of the testimony so far, then strayed from the path to rest content with what they had achieved. But the torch was taken up by others, and will be borne forward till the Lord Himself comes. The church, therefore, knows no organizational continuance. Its continuance lies in the spiritual life of the Lord's people wherever it has the opportunity of manifesting itself by their coining together in His name.

It is God's order today as much as it was in New Testament times that His people should gather simply on the ground of their relationship with Him, but we do well to look a little more closely at some of the temptations involved if we are to continue to be allowed to bear the torch of the testimony. In the many examples cited of Gods working, it will be noted how often one or two gifted men have played a particularly prominent role. This has been of God's ordering, for God works through His people according to the gifts He gives them. Yet every spiritual movement is much greater than any man. To understand this is easy in retrospect, but not always so easy in fact, where people live so much by sight while protesting that they live by faith alone. It is much easier to gather round a man than round the Lord, and the church will always face this temptation where the Lord finds a vessel particularly meet for His use. The world and organized religion will ever be ready to help them, to call them followers of a Priscillian or a Wycliffe or a Haldane, anything but followers of Christ. It was this danger to which the assembly at Corinth had nearly succumbed when Paul wrote his first letter to them.

The assembly based on the sure ground of Scripture faces a most subtle peril, the peril not of willingly accepting a denominational or sectarian position, but of allowing itself to be pushed into it. 'Exclusivism' among those who are truly children of God, is an odious word. The assembly is separate from worldly and ecclesiastical organizations not to be exclusive, but to be inclusive, for it is only outside the camp of denominationalism and sectarianism that a welcome for all who are regenerate can be maintained whatever their own religious background. What are more exclusive than the great councils of organized Christianity? Witness, for example, the feverish concern of modern ecumenicalism for 'unity' and the difficulties of agreeing on a basis of 'inter-communion simply because it is 'against the rules' in so many denominations. In other words, denominationalism is basically exclusive. It is so because it is based upon limitation, the acceptance of one aspect of divine truth, the acceptance of a particular rule or form, the acceptance of one man's interpretation of Scripture. When an assembly allows itself to be forced into that position of limitation, it becomes denominational.

Throughout the centuries, God's people who have sought fellowship only around Christ have struggled for namelessness. Consistently they have denied the name of some man or other label which has been attached to them, desiring only that they should be known as Christians, or brethren, or by such other simple designation as might find warrant in Scripture. It has always appeared to be a losing battle, and to some it may appear unimportant, yet when a company of believers has been willing to accept a name, it has also accepted the limitations that have gone with it. The struggle for namelessness is not an insignificant factor in the struggle of the church for its existence.

A little more may be said on doctrine and pattern in the church. The history of the spiritual movement of the church is the history of spiritual life. The fellowship of the church must be based squarely on the fact of spiritual life. What then is the relevance of doctrine and pattern? The latter part of the nineteenth century saw a widespread revolt against dogma. The widest liberties were allowed in the acceptance of the credal statements of the large denominations, with the result that they could mean anything or nothing, and it is today quite common to find within one denomination leaders who hold views that are poles apart, and some views that are quite incompatible with personal faith in Christ. It is often stated that the lack of unambiguous doctrinal statements with an insistence on a strict mode of interpretation is responsible for this state of affairs. But is this so? Rather does it seem that confusion and powerlessness exist, not because doctrine does not matter, but because nothing matters. Doctrine does matter, but the understanding of the things of Christ is the outflow of the life of Christ. The development of the great doctrines of grace in Scripture by the apostles was the result of their passionate devotion to the Saviour. Apart from that relationship of devotion born through regeneration, the most orthodox doctrinal statement or no doctrinal statement at all will equally mean spiritual death.

Spiritual life, where it is the sole basis of the fellowship of the church, is not unconcerned about doctrinal matters. On the contrary, it is vitally concerned, and always concerned, so that doctrine is not something learned out of a text book and finished with, but a progressive entering into more and more of the fullness of the Word of Truth. The Bible starts with experience, and from there moves on to fuller understanding. The dynamic experience of union with Christ cannot but determine our attitude towards Him. Which person, who has been truly regenerated, could believe that the Lord Jesus Christ was only a fallible human being? Those who belong to the family of God will develop a doctrine that is honouring to Him. History teaches us that dogma alone can never protect the spiritual life of the church, but the life of the Spirit is itself the surest protection of sound doctrine.

If, as has already been stated, the church knows no organizational continuance, it follows that pattern is not the prime mark of the New Testament assembly. Not that pattern is unimportant, but a church cannot be established by merely setting up what is thought to be a Scriptural form. It is not simply a matter of applying the correct technique.

The New Testament does not specifically set down rules and regulations whereby the fellowship of the church should be governed as, for example, instructions were given for the building of the tabernacle in the Old Testament. What may be deduced as details of a church pattern in the Acts or the Epistles were but the natural means whereby the outflow of the life of the Spirit manifested itself. Scripture always commences there, with life, and where spiritual life is truly uninhibited, spiritual pattern follows. That does not mean that the churches will show wide diversity of pattern. Differences there will be from one place to another, just as there was not a rigid sameness about the assemblies in apostolic times, but we have seen amply demonstrated through the centuries that although churches may grow up in different countries completely independent of one another, yet the pattern of their fellowship is not greatly dissimilar. Just as spiritual life determines doctrine in the church, it also determines pattern. The principle of fellowship, for example, in the family of God where all believers are priests, immediately excludes the acceptance of a distinction between clergy and laity and the adoption of an episcopal form of government. Wherever people are willing to obey the implications of spiritual principles as found in the Word of God, they will find that assembly order does not leave a great deal to be determined by human choice, neither does it allow the application of a cold, mechanical form. The development of the highly organized systems of denominational Christianity as we know them today has no valid, spiritual reason, and has but served to preserve 'Churches' which could otherwise exist no longer since the life of the Spirit has departed from them.

The spiritual life and the Scriptural order of the church go together. The order is the outcome of life, but it is also conversely true that the continuance of life is dependent on the order. All believers are priests and all are witnesses. The assembly does not recognise any member of its fellowship as a non-participant. The assembly is the focal point of Christian service and responsibility. Its order must encourage the constant flow of spiritual life, otherwise the order itself will be destroyed. Neither can it attract to its fellowship those who are unregenerate. The life and work of the assembly can afford no lasting lure to the unconverted, for fellowship, worship, intercession, are things which are foreign to the life of this world.

In some countries today there is great concern among the large Christian bodies to make the Church popular. Every conceivable scheme is being brought into play in order to attract people to the Church. It is forgotten that the true church can never be attractive to the world, and was never meant to be. It is something which is completely beyond the world's understanding. People are brought into the church through the witness of the Lord's children who comprise the church. When the life of Christ is expressed through a spiritual order, believers will maintain a witness that is spiritually effective. Others will be regenerated, and they will be added to the church, not because they, as worldly people, were attracted to it, but because they have been subject to a divine change which enables them to enter into life on a higher plane. The church's mission is not to fit in to the world, but to see men changed so that they will fit in to the church.

The church of the New Testament is no mere theory. It is a fact of this, the twentieth century, as it was of the first. The principles of the unchanging Word of God, having been demonstrated and tested for almost two thousand years, have proved themselves applicable to every age and every circumstance. The church authoritative, holy, witnessing, invincible has continued and will continue, not in outward show and ostentation, but wherever the Lord has found a people willing to gather round Him in submission and obedience. It is a church that is indissolubly one, bound by ties of the Spirit. Amid the bitter conflicts and tragedies of so-called Church history, the life of the spiritual movement of the church has flowed on through the ages. The splendid unity of a heavenly race, living a heavenly life parsed down from spiritual generation to the earth, bearing the reproach of Christ outside the camp, pressing 'on toward the goal unto the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus'. They gather round Christ their Head, owning His Word their guide, bearing the torch of the testimony.

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