

What It Is... And What It Should Be

By Brother Gene Aptaker

What **is** the Church as we know it in this day and age? And what **should** it be? Is the Church- what it is, what it does, how it operates- what the Lord has in mind? This is an extremely important question. If the answer is yes, then well and good. If the answer is no, there is some serious rekonig and repenting that needs to go on.

Before answering these questions, I find it interesting that the word of God clearly points toward a history of apostasy and the following of the ways of men for the Church. Here are just a few examples:

Jeremiah 23: 16-22- 16 Thus says the LORD of hosts: "Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you. They make you worthless; They speak a vision of their own heart, Not from the mouth of the LORD. 17 They continually say to those who despise Me, 'The LORD has said, "You shall have peace"; And to everyone who walks according to the dictates of his own heart, they say, 'No evil shall come upon you.'" 18 For who has stood in the counsel of the LORD, And has perceived and heard His word? Who has marked His word and heard it? 19 Behold, a whirlwind of the LORD has gone forth in fury— A violent whirlwind! It will fall violently on the head of the wicked. 20 The anger of the LORD will not turn back Until He has executed and performed the thoughts of His heart. In the latter days you will understand it perfectly. 21 "I have not sent these prophets, yet they ran. I have not spoken to them, yet they prophesied. 22 But if they had stood in My counsel, And had caused My people to hear My words, Then they would have turned them from their evil way And from the evil of their doings.

Acts 20: 25-31- 25 "And indeed, now I know that you all, among whom I have gone preaching the kingdom of God, will see my face no more. 26 Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all men. 27 For I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God. 28 Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. 29 For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. 30 Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves. 31 Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears.

Philippians 2: 19-21- 19 But I trust in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you shortly, that I also may be encouraged when I know your state. 20 For I have no one like-minded, who will sincerely care for your state. 21 For all seek their own, not the things which are of Christ Jesus.

2 Timothy 4: 1-4- 1 I charge you therefore before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, who will judge the living and the dead at His appearing and His kingdom: 2 Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching. 3 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; 4 and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables.

Revelation 3: 14-20- 14 "And to the angel of the church of the Laodiceans write, 'These things says the Amen, the Faithful and True Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God: 15 "I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I could wish you were cold or hot. 16 So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth. 17 Because you say, 'I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing'—and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked— 18 I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire, that you may be rich; and white garments, that you may be clothed, that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and anoint your eyes with eye salve, that you may see. 19 As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore be zealous and repent. 20 Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me.

There are some issues that have **always** gone on among the people of God, old covenant and new. First and foremost, they want things smooth and easy. No ruffling of the feathers. No demands or expectations. And they have always been willing and able to find teachers, prophets and "pastors" who will basically tell them what they want to hear.

What do they want to hear? They want to hear and believe, "The Lord has said, You shall have peace. No evil shall come upon you. You are the King's Kids. God sees you as righteous, and that's the **only way** He can **ever** see you. God doesn't expect or demand anything from you. That's all legalism. Sit back... relax, and enjoy the glorious benefits of being a child of the King. You can pursue your own wants and desires. Hasn't God said He will give you the desires of your heart? Suffering? Hardship? Self-denial? Jesus bore it all."

Maybe they don't want to hear it in quite so blatant a way, but they do want to hear it, and, in many ways and forms, the "pastors" provide it, either by what they say or by what they refuse to say.

In the Jeremiah passage above, it says, **The anger of the LORD will not turn back Until He has executed and performed the thoughts of His heart. In the latter days you will understand it perfectly.** " I have not sent

these prophets, yet they ran. I have not spoken to them, yet they prophesied. But if they had stood in My counsel, And had caused My people to hear My words, Then they would have turned them from their evil way And from the evil of their doings.

The Lord's intention has always been to bring His people into a practical reality of righteousness. He is NOT satisfied with "seeing" us as righteous, no matter what anyone tells you. If He was satisfied with that, He would be just a divine "illusionist", and we can be certain that He is not that.

The scriptural evidence for the fact that He intends to make us righteous in a real, practical sense is overwhelming, yet the "leaders" have always had a problem. The problem is this:

The people don't like or want to have their feathers ruffled. They don't want any demands or expectations placed upon them, even from God. So the teachers and leaders give them what they want, even if it means a forsaking of their true calling. If they don't, they might lose their job.

And consider this: In the other four passages above, Paul and Jesus make these statements very early in the history of the Church. All those statements were made before AD 100, and they clearly point toward apostasy, decline and self-seeking within the Church. What must things be like now?

So, what is the Church as we know it in this day and age?

In general (these things are not set in stone throughout the entire Church realm, although, in a practical sense, they are), it is this:

People go to a certain place once or twice, or even three times a week for a "service". Some of them come ten or fifteen minutes early, to have "fellowship". There is an "opening" song, then a few announcements, then a few more "worship" songs.

Then the main event, the pastor's sermon. The people listen attentively (or perhaps not) for 20-45 minutes, some even taking notes and many nodding or saying "Amen!"

There may or may not be some testimonies, a "special" song or performance or a "word of prayer", during which someone will "open" and someone "close".

Finally, after the "closing" song, some people (the committed ones) will hang around, or go out to eat with some other believers. When they do, they'll generally discuss the weather, the afternoon's football game or some similar things. This is the post-service "fellowship".

It is entirely, or almost entirely, pre-planned, pre-determined and even scheduled to end at a certain time. If not, the people would get "restless", and we couldn't have that. Could we?

There is very little, if any room for interaction or participation, except for those, of course, who are scheduled to do so, or the "leaders".

The teaching or preaching may have been very good. Perhaps not. It doesn't really matter because nobody will know whether anyone is applying the teaching to their lives, or not. How can anyone know? The relationships are too shallow, especially between the "pastor" and his flock.

I find it interesting that the biblical idea of "pastor" is really "shepherd". A shepherd is supposed to get down and dirty with his sheep. He's supposed to know their ways, their faults, their good and bad tendencies, which ones have parasites, etc. They're supposed to lead them into good things and keep them from bad things. It's quite a challenging job. It's very up-close and personal.

I don't know about you, but I have never even seen a "pastor" who is truly a shepherd. Actually, most pastors I've known don't really even want to be around the sheep. They insulate themselves with their followers and inner-circle and "duties".

They may be good administrators, or good with putting together a pretty decent sermon, or charismatic and able to draw followers, but I have not seen or had the benefit of a genuine shepherd. Have you?

And shepherds should be several in a body of believers, not one, and they should lead the flock by godly example. How can you lead people by godly example who you barely know, relate with or spend quality time with? How can you lead them if you don't know their ways, sins, tendencies, strengths, weaknesses? How can you lead them if they can't really see how you live out your faith on a daily basis? You can't.

Finally, the Church may or may not have a "prayer service", a mid-week service, a miracle and deliverance service, small "care-and-share" groups, an "outreach" or evangelistic thrust (but probably not), a "program" for feeding the hungry or helping the poor (many of whom are simply parasites), a "revival" week and a Vacation Bible School, to name just a few of the various and sundry things it does.

Sadly, most or all of these programs, projects and "services" have little, if any impact on the surrounding culture and society, and anybody, including the Shriners and Jehovah's Witnesses, can do the same things; often better.

SO, that's basically what the Church is and does in this day and age, and I can't comprehend how anybody can possibly think that this is what the Lord has, or has ever had, in mind for His body. Could this possibly be "IT"?

No, it can't. All of this droll, bland, lifeless, powerless, anemic "stuff" is not what the Lord has ever had in mind for His body.

So, what is the Church supposed to be? I believe that two passages of scripture can point the way, but we must have light upon these scriptures to really see what they are talking about. Often, we read through scriptures without probing and examining, especially in light of other scriptures, what they are telling us.

Acts 2: 42-47- 42 And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers. 43 Then fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. 44 Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, 45 and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need. 46 So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, 47 praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.

1 John 1:1-4- 1 That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life— 2 the life was manifested, and we have seen, and bear witness, and declare to you that eternal life which was with the Father and was manifested to us— 3 that which we have seen and heard we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ. 4 And these things we write to you that your joy may be full.

Let's look first at the passage in Acts. It says **they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers.** They continued steadfastly in these four things; four things we have little, if any understanding of today. The result was great power in their corporate life and witness.

They also continued daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart.

Are you getting the picture? They continued steadfastly in four essential things, which resulted in their life and witness having real power, unlike the Church of our day and age. They were so happy and glad in the simple realities of genuine fellowship and having the life of God in their midst, that they were no longer

concerned with "nonsense" like property, and who owned what and how much. They had God! They had each other!

The passage in 1 John fully supports this idea. John speaks of a living communion with a living God, and a resulting living communion between believers. We know nothing, or practically nothing, of this living, daily, glad, simple reality. How can we? We are too busy with programs, projects, services, pot-luck picnics and pursuing our own agendas in life.

Let's look at the four essential things. They are **the apostles' doctrine, fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayers.**

If these are the four things we are told the early Church continued steadfastly in, I believe it's safe to say that we, too, should be continuing steadfastly in them as well.

What is the apostles' doctrine? Does anybody know?

I don't believe there is any formal, written or verbal explanation or definition, anywhere, of exactly what the apostles' doctrine is. Why? Because to understand what the apostles' doctrine is, we will have to seriously search the word with an open heart and a genuine commitment to follow and obey what we see.

What do the apostles teach? They teach many things, like reckoning with the truth that we have died and been risen in Christ, unto a new life and nature, in order to bring forth fruit unto God. They teach the need to be perfected in the love of God, and to manifest His very ways and nature. They teach that believers are to be holy, as God is holy, and that without holiness, nobody will see the Lord. They teach that believers should be striving together for the faith of the gospel and not be terrified by their adversaries. They teach that real, genuine suffering is part of the gospel package, and that we need to continue patiently in it; that tribulation and persecution are evident tokens of the righteous judgment of God, so that we may be counted worthy of the kingdom of God for which we suffer (OH, what legalism and blasphemy!). They teach that believers are crucified to the world and the world is crucified unto them, and that those who walk according to that rule, the peace of God should be upon them. They teach that we should consider everything as rubbish in order to know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death. They also teach many other similar things.

That was quite a paragraph. Shall I go on? I don't believe that's necessary. I believe the picture is clear. The question is: Why do we not continue steadfastly in this, the apostles' doctrine?

Why do we go on, week after week, month after month, year after year, listening to the "pastor's" sermons about justification by faith alone? Why the endless programs, projects and activities? Why the fellowship that's really social interaction? Why the total lack of understanding about God's true calling by the vast majority of believers? Why such shallow relationships? Why the endless cycle of bible studies and "messages" and sermons and so, so little practical reality of the kind of life that the Lord is looking for in His people? Perhaps it's because we have discarded the apostles' doctrine?

What's next on our list of things the early Church did? Fellowship. Oh, we talk much about fellowship and we can convince ourselves that we are having it, but we are deluded. We don't even understand what the word means. We think that hanging around with some other believers, chit-chatting or entertaining ourselves, or having a mini-Church-service in someone's home, is fellowship. Nothing could be further from the truth.

The biblical idea of fellowship involves a deep, profound intimacy and knowing of one another, and a strong, common commitment to a vision and agenda. This is to exist between believers and God, and between believers with each other. And one of the major purposes of fellowship is the preparing, equipping and the provoking of believers to truly walk in the calling and purposes of God.

If we don't have deep, genuine communion with God and with each other, we will not walk the road of self-denial, suffering, hatred, ridicule, self-sacrifice and utter commitment to God's purposes and plans that we are clearly called to walk. We need each other's encouragement to walk out such a crazy existence. We must have real, biblical fellowship, but we know nothing of this reality. Instead, we "go to Church" and call it the assembling together of believers, or we call it fellowship. It's not.

Next comes the breaking of bread. We've heard about the "love feast" and the Lord's table as part of that, but we don't practice it. Instead, we eat a little cracker and drink a thimble-full of grape juice once in a while and call it "communion". The love feast was joyous and had an air of celebration, looking forward to the marriage supper of the Lamb. It involved spending real time together. Our "communion" today is just an occasional five-minute part of our Church "service".

Finally comes prayer. We don't understand prayer, either. Biblically, prayer is primarily a tool in the hands of genuine disciples, for the working out and accomplishing of the Lord's plans and purposes. Prove it, you say?

Luke 11: 1-13- 1 Now it came to pass, as He was praying in a certain place, when He ceased, that one of His disciples said to Him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John also taught his disciples." 2 So He said to

them, "When you pray, say:

**Our Father in heaven,
Hallowed be Your name.
Your kingdom come.
Your will be done
On earth as it is in heaven.
3 Give us day by day our daily bread.
4 And forgive us our sins, For we also forgive everyone who is
indebted to us.
And do not lead us into temptation,
But deliver us from the evil one."**

5 And He said to them, "Which of you shall have a friend, and go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves; 6 for a friend of mine has come to me on his journey, and I have nothing to set before him'; 7 and he will answer from within and say, 'Do not trouble me; the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot rise and give to you'? 8 I say to you, though he will not rise and give to him because he is his friend, yet because of his persistence he will rise and give him as many as he needs. 9 "So I say to you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. 10 For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. 11 If a son asks for bread from any father among you, will he give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will he give him a serpent instead of a fish? 12 Or if he asks for an egg, will he offer him a scorpion? 13 If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!"

In this passage in Luke, we have three things presented, one right after the other. First, "The Lord's Prayer". Second, the story of "the persistent friend". Third, the Lord's encouragement to ask, seek and knock.

Let's look at the beloved "Lord's Prayer" first. This is a model, not a memorized prayer to be said in AA meetings, for how disciples should pray. The entire "Sermon on the Mount" is a model and picture of the life of genuine disciples.

First, there is a recognition of the awesomeness, greatness and majesty of God. Then, there is the stating of God's intentions and purposes, which are the intentions and purposes of the disciples themselves (**Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.**). Keep in mind that the entire purpose and mission of the Lord Jesus can be summed up in those few words, and they should sum up ours, as well.

Then, there is an acknowledging of our basic needs and how we know we must depend on God for the providing of them, as we walk on a road of discipleship. Finally, there is the admission that there are some things that can throw us off track in our mission, and that we are dependant on God to carry us through these issues, too. They are sin, temptations to go off track, and the adversary, the Devil.

Next, Jesus talks about the persistent friend. This is not really about a man who needs bread to give to his friend. It is about disciples meeting the needs of others in God's name, and for God's glory, just as Jesus did.

Like the man in the story, we have nothing with which to satisfy the spiritual needs of those around us on their journey. We too must go to another in order to receive these provisions. The one we must go to is God.

Finally, the encouragement to ask, seek and knock. Notice that immediately after the story of the persistent friend, Jesus says, "**So I say to you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.**

He definitely connects it to the previous story, and He speaks of the Father giving the Holy Spirit to those who ask. What is the purpose of the giving of the Holy Spirit? The purpose is that believers might be baptized into one body, and carry on the work of the Lord, Jesus. It is the Spirit that convicts the world of sin, of righteousness and of judgment. It is the Spirit who draws men to the Lord. We need the Spirit to be and do what the Lord is calling us to.

I'll say it again: Prayer is primarily a tool in the hands of genuine disciples, for the working out and accomplishing of the Lord's plans and purposes. We are to pray that men's spiritual needs may be met through real disciples, moving and acting as the body of Christ, and we pray for the perfecting of the saints.

Look carefully at the following scriptures considering what I have been saying. Pay particular attention to the first one, although they are all important:

John 14: 12-14- 12 "**Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do he will do also; and greater works than these he will do, because I go to My Father. 13 And whatever you ask in My name, that I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. 14 If you ask anything in My name, I will do it.**

Philippians 1: 9-11- 9 **And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in knowledge and all discernment, 10 that you may approve the things that are excellent, that you may be sincere and without offense till the day of Christ, 11 being filled with the fruits of**

righteousness which are by Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

Romans 1: 8-11- 8 First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all, that your faith is spoken of throughout the whole world. 9 For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of His Son, that without ceasing I make mention of you always in my prayers, 10 making request if, by some means, now at last I may find a way in the will of God to come to you. 11 For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift, so that you may be established.

Ephesians 1: 15-19- 15 Therefore I also, after I heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, 16 do not cease to give thanks for you, making mention of you in my prayers: 17 that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him, 18 the eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, 19 and what *is* the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe, according to the working of His mighty power.

Ephesians 3: 14-19- 14 For this reason I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, 15 from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, 16 that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man, 17 that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, 18 may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height— 19 to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Colossians 1: 9-11- 9 For this reason we also, since the day we heard it, do not cease to pray for you, and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding; 10 that you may walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing Him, being fruitful in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; 11 strengthened with all might, according to His glorious power, for all patience and longsuffering with joy.

1 John 3: 16-23- 16 By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down *our* lives for the brethren. 17 But whoever has this world's goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him? 18 My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth. 19 And by this we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before Him. 20 For if our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and knows all things. 21 Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence toward God. 22 And whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do those things that are pleasing in His sight. 23

And this is His commandment: that we should believe on the name of His Son Jesus Christ and love one another, as He gave us commandment.

So, the prescription for genuine Church life and witness is quite simple. Know and follow the apostles' doctrine... have true biblical fellowship with God and His people... eat together and share in the Lord's supper with joy and simplicity... pray as if you are on a vital mission from God to see men's spiritual needs met, and to see believers perfected in the Lord, because you are on such a mission, whether you know it or not; whether you are seeking to fulfill it or not.