

The Lord's Work in Heathen Lands

Copy of an Old Letter.

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Inkongo, Nov. 15, 1913.

Extracted from Scripture Truth magazine, Volume 12, 1920, page 233.

My dear -,

It is a rather difficult thing to answer a question such as you ask. In case the form in which you put it is not retained in your memory, and also in order that question and answer may be in juxtaposition, I quote it as you gave it.

You enquire, "Has your experience as a missionary at all modified the thoughts which, as a mere "at home" Christian, you might have had with regard to Church organization? For example, the necessity of oversight, advice, and authority, on the part of the missionary in relation to the native converts, the connection of out-stations with the central mission, etc. These things have suggested to me how Church organization sprang up, and may have been justified by circumstances. I should be glad to hear if you have any clear vision upon the subject as the fruit of your missionary labours."

If you had asked the simple question whether or not Church organization as we see it around us is according to God and His Word, I think I should have asked you to enquire from others far more facile with the pen than I. But since you put it in the way you do, inviting me to state whether — *as the result of missionary experience* — one may not be disposed to excuse now what we speak of as Church organization, or even to regard it as a necessary development of Church history, I feel a sort of obligation to reply.

What you will read will not be a dogmatic setting forth of a position or a creed, but more of the nature of a contribution to your own exercise in and enjoyment of the Word, and of the Lord who is the Centre and Theme of all Scripture. For I think that some phases of Christian life can be realized only in certain circumstances. Others not situated as you are may be unable to see from your point of view; and if not lowly and sympathetic, may deliberately oppose any point of view other than their own. You remember what the grand old translators of the Authorized Version had to deplore; the being "maligned by self-conceited Brethren, who run their own ways, and give liking unto nothing but what is framed by themselves, and hammered on their own anvil" (Preface to the Authorized Version).

What is the "Church Organization" about which as mere "at home" Christians we used to have certain "thoughts"? Is it not the organization which demands the submission of the Christian to a central authority which in the case of the Romanist is vested in the Pope, in the case of the Anglican in his Archbishop, and in the case of the Nonconformist, in some Assembly, or Synod, or Conference? More lately we have had to add such a scheme as that of the Salvation Army, which, however, (though professing to appeal to Scripture in matters doctrinal) does not, I think, profess to be a *Church* organization, but simply and absolutely a military society for the salvation of souls; in which you have to surrender every exercise of your own conscience which may diverge from the will of the General.

The one thing which may be premised about the varied organizations is that they all originate in a revolt from something or other. The Romanist system is a clear revolt from the authority of Scripture. The Anglican movement is a clear revolt from the authority of Rome; and while it involved at first the closer study of the Word of God, it has resulted in the adoption of much on the Roman lines of

procedure, and is trending more and more into the things from which it revolted. The Nonconformist movements have all been on the same lines more or less, revolting — either from the Established Church because of some matter of conscience in which they felt that the doctrine or practice thereof differed from the Scripture; or else from each other as they differed in questions of administration and practice, or doctrine.

Amidst all the strife of tongues, the Holy Ghost has been pleased to preserve to us the Scriptures of which the text is definable with almost absolute certainty, and which forms a pure and indivisible whole of which every atom is consistent with every other atom; and any version of which can be tested in the first place by the simple question, "Is it in every part consistent with itself?" If for party purposes a version is tampered with in some parts, it betrays itself; for it immediately dislocates some other part. And the great final test is whether, being consistent in every part with itself, it is in its entirety consistent with *Christ*. For He is the living Word; and of necessity the written Word must coincide with Him even as two equal circles having one centre must coincide with each other, or as two straight lines starting from one point and terminating in another point must of necessity lie in one and the same plane.

I refer to this because nothing could guide us in the perplexing questions of the day but the sure Word of God. Take the question of salvation in any aspect you please. "Neither is there salvation in any other" is a straight line. Placing salvation in Mary (blessed though she be among women), or the Pope, or sacraments, or in good works, or in the assembly, is a deviation from God's straight line. Either it does not begin with God's point, or it does not end with God's point. The straight line is Christ, and salvation in Him alone: to place our thought of salvation anywhere else is a deviation from God's straight line as anyone can see.

So also — and here please discover some answer to your query — as to the matter of authority. "All power (*exousia*, authority) is given to me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore and disciple all nations." Where then is God's centre of authority from Whom the entire circumference of our service for Him is drawn? It is in the risen Christ; the Jehovah-Saviour (Jesus) come up out of death, and prepared to fulfil every part of God's will in all the universe. If you put any other point as your centre of authority, your whole circle is wrong. If you deviate a hair's breadth from the true Centre your whole circle is eccentric. Further, if your central point be anywhere within the so-called Christian circle — be it Byzantium, Rome, Canterbury, London; or any place, company, or person, other than Christ — not only is your circle eccentric, but you *cut* God's circle somewhere, and *schism* is the result.

I feel, therefore, that it will not do to lose sight of Christ in any circumstances whatever. Our living in the 20th century does not alter Him, nor the powers and glories invested in Him. Our being in the "missionary field" does not require the least change in the letter of God's Holy Word. In no part of the Holy Scripture are we instructed to look for a transfer of His authority from Himself to some other, so that He should cease to *be it*, and the secondary point or person *become it*. Delegated authority there was, but not such as to turn the eye from Christ. Apostolic? Yes: but for what?" Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against *the knowledge of God*, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of *Christ* (2 Cor. 4: 5). Evidently the apostle's delegated authority was not to hide or pervert the knowledge of God; but — in addition to the communication of this knowledge, first by the oral teaching of the apostles, and then by their writings — it was also designed to bring every soul into contact with, and into unfeigned allegiance to, the Person of the Christ. This is the sure corrective of all mere independence, and of the idea of every man becoming a pope in himself. Sometimes I fear we betray our little knowledge of God, and our little subjection to Christ, by a manner altogether at variance with the mellowing influence of His company.

There are tens of thousands of the Lord's people who cannot articulate a matter for themselves, who yet can see it the moment it is articulated for them. What then is the business of anyone ministering in the Church, be he apostle or prophet, pastor and teacher, or evangelist, or elder, or anything else? Is it not to *articulate* what is true in Christ? You first of all learn for yourself what is true in Him, — in your own case, of course, from the Scriptures, and in dependence upon God the Holy Ghost; — then you prove it in your own soul's experience, and then finally you pass it on for the guidance and help of all whom God, by His providence, has placed within your reach. So that authority in the Church in its true sense is not the "ex cathedra" utterance of an ecclesiastic, but the education of Christ's people, their guidance in difficulties, their help in pressure, by the application of a deep knowledge of Christ to a shallow or defective one. This is a hundred times over confirmed in the New Testament. I can quite understand that when as yet there were no Scriptures in circulation, the Holy Ghost was pleased to use apostles and prophets to utter the mind of God, and the truth of Christ for the guidance and edification of the Church. But on their passing off the scene their teachings were preserved by the wisdom and power of the Spirit of God in the form of the Scriptures. "I commend you to God and to the word of His grace" (Acts 20).

To come more particularly to your question, I do not think that years of missionary experience have in the slightest degree diverted the force of the Word of God; nor have they shown me that there is any better way of solving the missionary difficulties, or for carrying on missionary labour, than by perpetual reference to headquarters. Happily we have not the difficulty that many devoted missionaries have, of acting under orders from a society at home. Our access to Christ is therefore simple and undistracted, and our absolute dependence upon Him for financial support helps to keep our faith in exercise. When the work was small we had to look to Him day by day, and He sufficed. Now the work has expanded and is expanding, will His resources fail? Are we justified in "making other arrangements" now that He is blessing His word? Are we to substitute some other authority for His immediate guidance? If the converts multiply, and the working area becomes vast, and too great for us, shall we sink our privilege of asking wisdom of God, and turn to committees and organizations after the manner of men? Is the area too vast, are the numbers too great, for Him? We have only to think of the whole Church, and of Christ's untiring love, and incessant care for it, to have our answer.

Our happy privilege, then, is to teach the converts their right of way to Him. We seek in every way to unfold His sufficiency to them, so that if we should be removed tomorrow, they should not be as orphans bereft of all help, but should look still to One well-known already to the affection of their hearts as their unfailing Resource. We encourage their learning to read, and above all to read the Word; we show them from the Scriptures that the bearing of fruit is the proof of discipleship, that obedience and love Godward, and service manward, are everywhere enjoined in the New Testament.

Accordingly the developments around us have been almost entirely voluntary and spontaneous. I cannot recall the slightest suggestion having been made to the evangelists already supported by Christians as to where they should locate themselves. They have been into certain neighbourhoods, ascertained the possibility or otherwise of a place for work, and the first we have heard of them has been that they have gone. Constrained as we hope by the love of Christ and the thrill of service, they have been willing to isolate themselves and to work on month after month until souls have yielded, and God in grace has given seals to their ministry. There is a loving interest in the white missionaries who have been at Inkongo, and a certain looking up to them, but I do not think that one of them regards himself as being under the authority of Inkongo. They turn to us as teachers who will show them from the Scriptures what course is right, but I hope that every one of them does so because of his subjection to the Word of God, and not because he regards himself as the employee of a master. They receive help

from the assembly funds, but the amount sent is not regulated by the white man, nor is it paid by the white man. There are men who do regular deacons' work, in the way of receiving the collections and of distributing to the poor and to the Lord's native servants; but beyond asking advice now and then and receiving it from the infallible Word, they are as free as though we were not there.

There are opportunities now and then for men to journey to see their brethren in the more distant places, or perhaps to evangelize districts seldom visited. In these cases they often go entirely at their own charges; but occasionally, if the deacons opine that the Christians ought to help them to buy their food, they do so on their own initiative. In this way, as it seems to me, the place and work of the Holy Ghost in the Assembly is unbarred and unfettered; each has a holy liberty to act as he is impressed by the Spirit. Mistakes may be made, and are made; but Peter made mistakes, and I am sure we white folks do. But mistakes are corrected not by sheer force of authority, but by prayerful and humble consideration of what the Scripture says. Paul did not correct Peter by the weight of authority, but by showing him what was consistent with the truth in Jesus.

I daresay that if anyone saw these sentences who has hitherto relied on the organized ways of the churches in general, he might think this a very loosely constructed building. Perhaps so. But since you asked me the result of my missionary experience, now nearly seventeen years here, I give only that which we prove.

I will add two things.

The first, — that in all meetings of what you would call the Christian assembly (I do not speak of *Gospel* meetings), we have no leader as men speak. The white man is there on the same footing at his black brother and very very often the whole meeting, including the breaking of the bread, is conducted in a happy, orderly way and with unction by the black brothers, and without any audible part taken by the white.

The second, — that we make a distinction between educational work pure and simple, and the preaching of the Gospel. So that in certain instances we feel at liberty to pay a youth or a man whose ability marks him out as a school teacher, to teach letters, syllables, words, and sentences. This enables men, women, and children to read; and so far is preparatory to that reading of the Scriptures which we hope will turn to blessing afterwards. But this payment of school teachers is not made if one of the Christians combines evangelization with teaching in some distant part; for if he be an evangelist he is the Lord's servant and not ours. In that case it is a subject for consideration that he be helped by his brethren.